

**LINDA TRIPP  
BREAKS HER SILENCE**  
PETER J. BOYER

the weekly

# Standard

DECEMBER 4, 2017

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## KING OF THE JUNGLE

**CHARLOTTE ALLEN**  
on the Mayan empire  
of archaeologist Richard D. Hansen

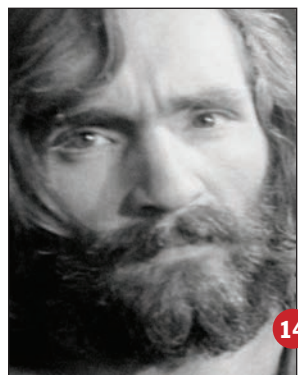
A temple at the  
El Mirador site  
in Guatemala

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# Undoing an Epic Act of Civic Vandalism

THE SCRAPBOOK knows there is little that real Americans find so tiresome as lifestyle complaints from East Coast elites who graze up and down the moneyed Acela corridor (“when the waiter *finally* brought the *petits farcis provençaux* the vegetables were criminally underdone!”). But allow us this one beef: Pennsylvania Station in New York is the ugliest, smelliest, least commodious railroad station in the known universe.

It was not always so. The original Penn Station, built in 1910, was a Beaux-Arts masterpiece designed by the great firm of McKim, Mead, and White. It was demolished 53 years later in what one critic called “an act of civic vandalism” and what we would call a typical spasm of 1960s tastelessness. Where once visitors to New York arrived in a skylit concourse and a vast marble waiting room awash in light from gilded windows three stories high, their great-great-grandchildren now must stoop through a gray, low-ceilinged maze awash in ... we don’t want to know what it’s awash in.

Plans are under way to partially civilize and humanize the current eyesore. But some historians, architects, and preservationists rightly believe



*The once and future architectural bling*

the plans don’t go far enough. They have formed a group called Rebuild Penn Station, and their goal is to, um, rebuild Penn Station. The *original* Penn Station.

They note that the original architectural drawings still exist and are still usable, and much of the granite stonework can be recovered from the New Jersey marshes where it was ignominiously dumped in 1963. They point to the renovated Grand Central Terminal, now one of the city’s premier tourist attractions, as evidence that a rebuilt architectural masterpiece could generate sufficient economic activity to partially offset the cost.

Fun fact: The entire Grand Central could fit in the original Penn Station’s waiting room.

Farfetched? You bet. Implausible? Maybe. Totally bonkers? Well, now, let’s not get carried away! Stranger things have happened (e.g., Al Franken is, at least as of this writing, a United States senator). If we must dream—and people do need to dream—we should dream big. The restoration of beauty where now there is only soul-crushing ugliness is a worthy goal, and THE SCRAPBOOK, for one, is ready to hop on board, if you’ll forgive the expression. Join us at [www.RebuildPennStation.org](http://www.RebuildPennStation.org). ♦

## It Isn’t Just Glory That Is Fleeting



*Bobby Baker, left, with Mr. Big*

We were genuinely surprised one morning last week to open the pages of the *Washington Post* and find an obituary for Bobby Baker, who had just died on his 89th birthday. We were surprised that his obituary was on the

obituary page and not the front page, where stories about Baker usually used to run.

Who was Bobby Baker, you ask? An ambitious young man from small-town South Carolina who came to Washington, D.C., in the late 1940s to become a Senate page. Within the next decade he had become a powerful Capitol Hill staffer and close confidant and fixer for several prominent Democrats, including (and perhaps especially) then-majority leader Lyndon Johnson.

But Baker’s portfolio was impressively diversified. In October 1963, a lawsuit revealed that he also had extensive business interests—in vending machines, motels, and real estate,

among other ventures. Questions were asked how a Capitol Hill staffer could afford such investments on a modest federal salary. The Senate undertook an investigation and conducted hearings. But the Kennedy assassination interrupted its momentum, and Democrats, who in those days enjoyed a prohibitive majority in the Senate, were reluctant to pursue a trail of corruption that might lead to the new president.

Baker was ultimately tried and convicted of tax evasion and served a brief term in prison. But our point is slightly wider than this brief outline of the now-forgotten Bobby Baker Scandal. At its height, during 1963-64, it would

TOP: COURTESY OF REBUILD PENN STATION.ORG; BOTTOM: GREY VILLET / THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION / GETTY



have been difficult to read any major American newspaper and not find some story about the latest developments in that unfolding saga of money, sex, influence, and Congress. Yet, in the course of a half-century, news about political corruption, and the self-protective culture of power in the nation's capital, has become so ubiquitous that the death of Bobby Baker, who personified the problem a generation ago, caused scarcely a ripple. ♦

## Rhodes Less Trampled

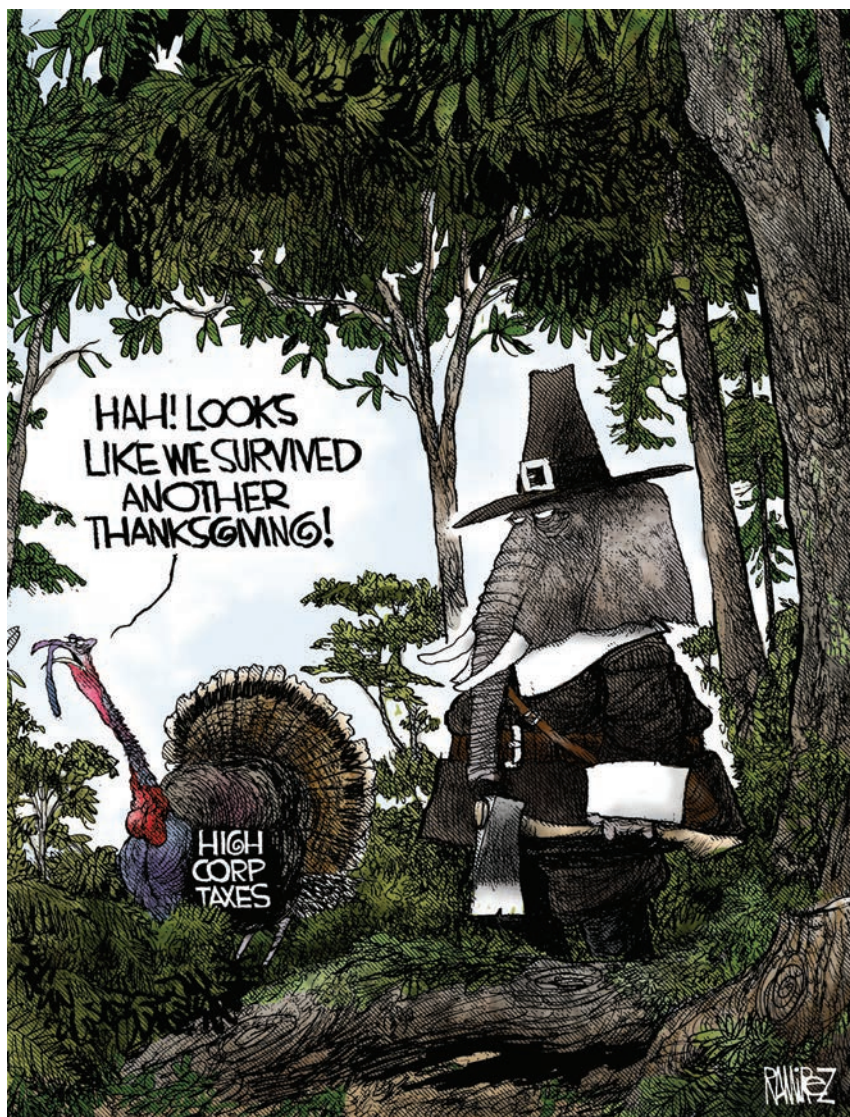
THE SCRAPBOOK has long been a connoisseur of bogus quotations—homely sayings attributed to Abraham Lincoln or Thomas Jefferson that sound nothing like what these men would have said. Nowadays, thanks to the Internet and email, these misattributions are everywhere. Some historical figures seem to attract them as sugar does flies: You hardly see a pithy remark anymore without Winston Churchill's name attached to it.

Several times in recent years we've seen the following remark attributed to the notable British imperial politician and businessman Cecil Rhodes (the fellow for whom Rhodes scholarships are named):

We must find new lands from which we can easily obtain raw materials and at the same time exploit the cheap slave labour that is available from the natives of the colonies. The colonies would also provide a dumping ground for the surplus goods produced in our factories.

The words have doubtless damaged Rhodes's reputation, so commonly do they appear in publications and on blogs run by academic historians and literary scholars. If he said them, it would be proof of the man's exploitative racism. But did he? Some historians, such as Bernard Porter, have called the quote into question. But Paul Thomas Murphy, author of *Shooting Victoria*, recently dug into the question in earnest and has been sharing his findings with fellow historians:

The earliest instance I can find of this quotation appears in 1976, in K. Tjabavu's *Zimbabwe, Rhodesia*:



*Guidelines to National Liberation*, page 3. In that journal, the quotation continues, "The Empire, as I have always said, is a bread and butter question. If we want to avoid class struggle in the United Kingdom, we must become imperialists."

These words strongly suggest that the quotation is a garbled rendition of Vladimir Lenin's words when he attempts to quote Cecil Rhodes in his *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917). In its English translation, this is the quote: "My cherished idea is a solution for the social problem, i.e., in order to save the 40,000,000 inhabitants of the United Kingdom from a bloody civil

war, we colonial statesmen must acquire new lands to settle the surplus population, to provide new markets for the goods produced in the factories and mines. The Empire, as I have always said, is a bread and butter question. If you want to avoid civil war, you must become imperialists."

Lenin's source, one M. Beer in the German periodical *Neue Zeit*, actually quotes (and translates into German) *The History of the Mystery* (1897), by the journalist W.T. Stead. Stead was a friend, confidante, and promoter of Rhodes. But *The History of the Mystery* isn't exactly history—it's a novel, a fictionalized account of the Jameson Raid. And Stead isn't



Cecil Rhodes



exactly quoting his friend Rhodes; rather, he's putting a reconstruction of Rhodes's thinking into the mouth of a fictional character based upon Rhodes, "Robert J. Cecil." The actual quotation from the novel: "My great idea is the solution of the social problem, which, being interpreted, means that in order to keep your forty millions here from eating each other for lack of other victuals, we beyond the seas must keep open as much of the surface of this planet as we can for the overflow of your population to inhabit, and to create markets where you can dispose of the produce of your factories and your mines. The Empire, I am always telling you, is a bread-and-butter question. If you have not to be cannibals, you have got to be imperialists."

So: Stead's recollection of Rhodes's ideas, almost certainly not a direct quotation, was published in 1897; the *Neue Zeit* (the same year) translated this; Lenin then quoted the German (in Russian, of course); the Russian was later translated back to English; by 1976, someone got ahold of that translation and paraphrased it—badly and certainly

maliciously—and then represented it as a direct quotation.

The major difference between Stead's quotation (as well as Lenin's) and the one clearly derived from it, of course, is that the nasty words about "cheap slave labour" aren't there—and indeed, make no sense in the context of the original. I'm not a fan of Cecil Rhodes—but that bogus addition is clearly nothing short of defamatory. Defamatory—and effective: Since the 1970s that quotation—stated as Rhodes's actual words—has appeared in dozens of books, and *thousands* of times on the Internet: usually quoted as Exhibit A in vilifying Rhodes and British Imperialism.

This "quotation" should be Exhibit A, rather, in demonstrating the dangers of quoting quotes from secondary sources as absolutely true.

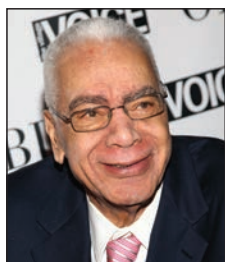
We applaud Murphy for reminding his fellow historians of that time-honored truth first uttered by George Washington: "Don't assume quotations pulled from the Internet are genuine." ♦

## Grandpa Knows Best

Actor Earle Hyman, best known, if not altogether justly, for playing Grandfather Huxtable on *The Cosby Show* from 1984 to 1992, died November 17 at the age of 91.

Hyman, according to the *New York Times*, "paid the bills" with television gigs to underwrite his work in the theater, where his career of more than six decades included Broadway appearances in plays by Beckett and Pinter, Albee and O'Neill, Ibsen and Shakespeare. He was in the cohort of young black actors who sought to open the repertoire to more equitable and imaginative casting.

It turns out that not the least of Hyman's accomplishments was being the first American to act in Norwegian to Norwegians, playing Othello in Bergen in 1963. He spent several months a year in Scandinavia for five decades,



Earle Hyman

telling the *Times* that he appreciated the unimportance of race there. In the United States, he said in 1991, there was still a question when black actors were cast in roles that had been traditionally white. "Just the fact that people still ask that question—should we or shouldn't we—proves that things have not come a long way." He added that in Norway he had "played a Norwegian archbishop and no one has raised a question."

THE SCRAPBOOK can't help noticing that the idea of color-blind casting has run into some trouble recently. White actors playing Asian or Hispanic roles are now regularly decried as invidious beneficiaries of "whitewashing." In some ways casting has become not color blind but color obsessed.

Can you blame us for wishing for a bit of Hyman's wisdom, perhaps delivered, befitting his experience, as grandfatherly advice? ♦

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# Privilege Your Check

A notice came last week from a newspaper I subscribe to. Since “offering check payments is becoming increasingly difficult to support,” the paper is “looking to move all our readers to digital payment methods.” The letter was bossy and presumptuous but the upshot was clear. There’s no longer anyone in the paper’s back office in the Philippines who’ll handle my checks for 11 cents an hour. So I’m going to have to start paying online.

When electronic banking first appeared I was just out of college and cursed with the drinking habits I had acquired there. The ability to manage one’s life savings at 2 o’clock in the morning struck me as more a menace than a boon. So I stuck with the checkbook, sorting the gas and magazine and (eventually) mortgage bills as they came in the mail and paying off a stack of them every week or so.

It was my mother who, in my teen years, taught me the language of check-writing and recording: the space-filling line that keeps the payee from taking \$60,000 out of your account instead of \$60 (a hypothetical worry, given my paper-route earnings), the use of xx/100 to mean “zero cents,” the spots for branch numbers on deposit slips. All literate Americans needed this knowledge.

They don’t anymore. One of the hardest things to impart to young people about the world before computers is how full it was of hugely important things that existed in only one perishable, losable copy. Novels: Robert Ludlum lost the manuscript of his first one in San Francisco while on shore leave, drunk. Tickets: A friend who had boasted for months

that he was going to see the Red Sox showed up in school the next day not having gone, because his parents had left the tickets on the kitchen table. Hall passes: Another friend served a detention when the assistant principal stopped him in the hall and he couldn’t find his library pass.

Young people will ask: *Couldn’t the assistant principal just verify that the teacher had written the hall pass?* Well,



maybe, but things tended not to work that way. People didn’t “follow up” and “reach out” and “circle back.” The teacher who’d written the pass didn’t deserve to be bothered. But there was a principle at stake, too: The authority had *left* the holder of it and now resided, rather magically, in the document itself, which had gone out into the world. This attitude was consistent with the immeasurably higher esteem in which literature was then held.

Documents were vulnerable, but they held power, too. Nice paper was important: Up until about 1995, any podunk town could support a stationer’s shop. Institutional paper was indispensable: As a young editor I would call a New York publisher and

ask for a review copy of a book. They would invariably ask me to write them a letter “on company letterhead.” Why? Just ‘cause.

A friend of mine described the conference invitations sent to foreign statesmen on behalf of his big Midwestern university. The stationery was commensurate with the purpose. It was on thick, creamy paper stock with a ribbon descending down the left side, sparkling with gold thread and anchored with a thick impasto of red sealing-wax. In that pre-politically correct era, they called it the Dago-dazzler. No one, not even a head of state, had ever been known to refuse an invitation issued on it.

In the 1980s, people started to “express their personality” on the most important documents of all: checks. The fad passed, but many of my first paychecks had sunsets and puppies on them. This wasn’t the dignified workingman’s lot that Bruce Springsteen had taught me to expect. It was a first sign that people were getting less dazzled by checks. And sometime in the last decade or so my lifestyle choice turned into an anachronism.

But was I wrong to think writing checks was less dangerous than the alternative? The chicanery revealed after the 2008 finance crisis, the recent leaks of personal data from Equifax and other places, which regulatory authorities appear unable or disinclined to stem—these things will eventually cost us all the time we think we have saved through “convenient” online banking. Too late now, though. You get lured through the door of innovation with the option of doing things a new way, and while you’re figuring out whether you like it, the door through which you entered slams shut. Most technological innovations are this way. As the motto of the Chicago World’s Fair of 1933 put it: *Science finds—industry applies—man conforms.*

CHRISTOPHER CALDWELL

# The Unipartisan Tax Bill

In 1986, President Reagan signed the largest overhaul of the U.S. tax system since the New Deal. The law simplified the tax code and substantially reduced individual rates for the second time in Reagan's presidency—the top rate coming down to 28 percent from 50 percent. When Reagan had appealed for reform in a televised address in 1985, Rep. Dan Rostenkowski of Chicago gave the Democratic response. He urged viewers to *support* the reform by writing letters to his office—and more than 75,000 did. The final bill received votes from 176 House Democrats, then in the majority, and 33 Senate Democrats.

We remember those days, and they didn't feel all that bipartisan at the time. But the personal acrimony of our political life had not yet become chronic, and America had a gifted leader in the White House.

For the last three decades, any effort by Republicans to reform the tax code or reduce taxes has generated a rote response from Democrats: You're favoring the rich and hurting the middle class. It's a tired and tendentious accusation, but it's rooted in a fundamental disagreement about the purpose of tax reform. Republicans think it is to spur overall economic growth, and since the wealthier pay more in taxes both as individuals and business owners, so they will tend to benefit more from any large-scale tax reform. Democrats believe the purpose of tax reform is to make things easier for certain preferred earners; they show little or no concern for overall economic growth.

The House passed the GOP tax reform bill last week by a vote of 227 to 205—13 Republicans and every Democrat voted “no.” The response from the opposition was utterly predictable. The bill is “another example of Republicans prioritizing the wealthy over the middle class,” thundered minority whip Steny Hoyer of Maryland. (Hoyer voted “no” on the 1986 act, too, but did so reluctantly, he said, and without the full-throated denunciations.)

Of course, if you treat the tax bill as a pie and ask who gets the biggest piece, you'll conclude that corporations benefit more than middle-income individuals. That's because the bill passed by the House—like its Senate counterpart—reduces individual tax rates only slightly but reduces the corporate rate from 35 percent to 20 percent, the lowest rate since before the Second World War. Companies benefit, yes. But so will everybody else. Bringing U.S. corporate taxation in line with that of our global peers will spur the sort of broad-based growth that the Obama

administration's central planners could never achieve and that will benefit middle-income families quite as much as “the wealthy.”

Both the bill passed by the House and the separate one before the Senate get rid of an array of exemptions and deductions—that's what reform bills are supposed to do—and some of these hit middle-income earners. Among them: the elimination of the deduction for payment of state and local taxes. The deduction was always a favor to high-tax states, a way to shield them from the consequences of their own bad policies and force other states' taxpayers to make up the difference. But both the House and Senate bills include commensurate breaks for those same middle-income earners. The House bill nearly doubles the standard deduction and increases the child tax credit from \$1,000 to \$1,600 per child (the Senate version increases the credit to \$2,000).

Neither bill's reform components compare to the 1986 act—the tax code will remain a mess, and paying one's taxes will still feel like a bewildering quest in search of deductions. But the House bill, at least, contains some needed simplification: It cuts the number of brackets from seven to four, abolishes the estate tax, and gets rid of arbitrary breaks for such things as medical expenses, student-loan interest, and rehabilitating a historic home.

Democrats are complaining that there were no hearings on the bill. We're sympathetic to their concerns, and it's beyond dispute that the process hasn't exactly been the kind of deliberation the Founders imagined. But Democrats have known what's in this plan for months. The House bill passed quickly and easily. The Senate bill will not. Republicans can only lose two votes, and members are already balking.

Ron Johnson of Wisconsin has said he won't support the bill unless changes are made to benefit small businesses—so-called pass-through entities that pay their taxes at the individual rates. The Senate bill includes an elimination of the individual health insurance mandate, the linchpin of the Affordable Care Act, and Maine's Susan Collins believes this provision “complicates” things. Senators from high-tax states are worried about the elimination of those precious deductions for state and local taxes. And outgoing members Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) and Bob Corker (R-Tenn.) are worried about the deficit.

It's guaranteed that not a single Democrat will vote for the Senate bill. But there's no reason Democrats should object to reducing the corporate tax rate, which is almost



the world's highest. The individual reductions are small in comparison to the Reagan-era cuts. And what are Democrats' objections to the simplifications? Left-liberal doctrine does not hold that tax codes should be riddled with favors for groups with the best lobbyists.

If the tax reform bill gets signed into law and the corporate rate drops by 15 points, American companies will expand and hire, benefiting a great many Americans. Democrats in 1986 would have at least understood the point, even if in the end they voted the other way. If only we could return to the rancor and partisanship of 1986. ♦

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# North Korea, Re-Listed



*A North Korean missile, readied for a test launch, July 4, 2017*

If you asked any ordinarily informed citizen if the State Department considered North Korea a state sponsor of terrorism, the answer would likely be “Of course.” And yet for nine years, from the end of the George W. Bush administration until November 20, the world’s most sinister and repressive regime wasn’t on that list.

It was delisted in 2008 as part of a Bush administration effort, spearheaded by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, to coax the regime into negotiations over its nuclear weapons program. That effort was not well-publicized; much of it, as this magazine later reported, took place in secret. The Bush administration—whose principal had in 2001 named North Korea part of an “axis of evil” that aided terrorist states and organizations—had suddenly decided Kim Jong-il’s regime could be negotiated with fruitfully.

“Nobody believes that this is a regime that you can believe,” Rice told *THE WEEKLY STANDARD*’s Stephen F. Hayes at the time. “The question is: Is this a regime that, under the right set of incentives and disincentives, is prepared to make some fundamental choices about its nuclear

program that would ultimately put the United States and the rest of the world in a safer position vis-à-vis the Korean Peninsula and, most importantly, vis-à-vis proliferation? That’s the question.”

The answer was “No,” as Rice and her subordinates at the State Department should have foreseen, and as President Bush should have known to remind them.

North Korea had been placed on the list in 1988 as a result of killing 115 people aboard Korean Air flight 858 and assassinating several South Korean officials in Burma. The regime would do plenty in the years that followed to remind the world that the Kims’ power is based on a mix of domestic and international terrorism. In 2007, just a year before the State Department removed North Korea from its terrorism sponsor list, American officials learned that the country had assisted Syria in the construction of a nuclear reactor—which would be bombed by the Israelis.

There were plenty of opportunities to re-list the DPRK over the last nine years. The North Koreans have tried to aid Iran with surface-to-air missiles and artillery rockets—and may have succeeded as we only know about the shipments that were intercepted. The North has repeatedly abducted Japanese citizens and attempted to kill at least three human rights activists in China and South Korea—and succeeded in killing a fourth—using what looked like pens but were actually syringes loaded with a lethal toxin. It suppressed the release of an American movie, *The Interview*, by threatening terrorist attacks on theaters and then hacked the computer systems of Sony Pictures in retaliation.

In February, Kim Jong-un, who succeeded his father in 2011, sent an agent to Kuala Lumpur to assassinate his exiled brother with a banned nerve agent. In January 2016, North Korea arrested an American citizen, Otto Warmbier, for the “crime” of attempting to take a propaganda poster from his hotel in Pyongyang. Warmbier was returned to the United States in a state of unconsciousness having suffered an extensive loss of brain tissue while in prison in what was almost certainly some sinister experiment. He died on June 19.

Some of these bizarre and malicious acts may not meet the State Department’s technical definition of terrorism, but most do, and nobody outside the world’s diplomatic elite would conclude that North Korea doesn’t deserve to be on the list with Iran, Syria, and Sudan.

Donald Trump’s ordering the re-listing of North Korea as a state sponsor of terrorism is more than a symbolic gesture. It allows for further economic sanctions—North Korea is only the fourth-most-sanctioned regime in the world, behind Russia, Syria, and Iran—and on November 21, the Treasury Department announced new sanctions against one individual, 13 companies, and 20 shipping vessels. But it is a symbol, too. It is a forceful reminder that sophisticated Western diplomats, in their quest for peace and rapprochement, can be talked into making some very stupid decisions. ♦



# 'It's a Day Late, and It's a Dollar Short'

Linda Tripp revisits the Clinton sex scandals.

BY PETER J. BOYER

As the reckoning over sexual abuse finally reaches Bill Clinton, with handwringing by some of his former defenders in the press and in politics, one Clinton White House veteran is following developments with particular interest—and a large measure of skepticism.

"It's a day late, and it's a dollar short," says Linda Tripp, who, 20 years ago, was thrust into the center of the sex scandal that led to Clinton's impeachment. It was Tripp who revealed the president's sexual relationship with a 21-year-old White House intern and, for her troubles, was painted as the villain of the sordid episode.

Tripp has a quiet life in Northern Virginia horse country, avoiding the public attention that was so unwelcome in the late 1990s. But the unending flow of headlines about the bad behavior of powerful men, she says, "is forcing me to relive a lot of it." She's unconvinced by recent calls in the press for Clinton's deeds to be reconsidered in a more critical light. "They have nothing to lose, and this is now permissible," she says. "The fact that the Clintons are dead in the water gives [the media] tacit approval to act like human beings. . . . It's disingenuous."

She finds it particularly galling to hear former Clinton defenders attributing their latter-day awakening to evolving social mores. In

a November 16 interview with the *New York Times*, New York senator Kirsten Gillibrand said that she now believes that Bill Clinton should have resigned because of his relationship with Monica Lewinsky. "Things have changed," she said.

"What information do they have at their fingertips today that they didn't have 20 years ago?" Tripp asks. "What information has changed?"

There were people back then—Linda Tripp, for instance—who reflexively knew that when a president of the United States repeatedly summons a star-struck young White House intern to sexually service him, it is more than a private

romantic dalliance. "I'm so weary of hearing that society's mores have changed," she says, "when I knew that this was an abuse of, essentially, a kid."

When the Clintons moved into the White House in 1993, Tripp was already there, a career civil servant. A divorced mother of two teenagers, Tripp was known for strait-laced efficiency and a person with no discernible politics but who openly admired the old-school patriotism she had seen as a secretary in the George H.W. Bush White House. This made her an imperfect fit with the freewheeling Clintons, although she was, as executive assistant to Clinton's chief counsel, located near the very seat of power (her workspace was, for a time, adjacent to Hillary's, and she brought deputy counsel Vince Foster what turned out to be his last meal on the day he committed suicide).



Linda Tripp in 1999

The more Tripp saw of the Clinton administration, the more uncomfortable she became. She thought that the personnel in the White House travel and correspondence offices were shabbily treated, and what she saw and heard about the president's libidinous impulses appalled her. "The housekeeping staff was afraid to bend over in his presence," she says. Tripp's discomfort must have been obvious, as in August 1994 she was transferred to the public affairs office of the Pentagon.

Twenty months later, in April 1996, another White House staffer whose presence had become problematic was transferred to the Pentagon: Monica Lewinsky joined Tripp in the basement offices of the public affairs staff. The two women, though separated in age by 24 years, became close. Lewinsky had man troubles, and Tripp, whose own children were not much younger than Lewinsky, has a den-mother's nature. "It was construed as a friendship between two girls, which it never was," Tripp says now. "I always felt like the mother."

By summer, Lewinsky was confiding to Tripp about her relationship with Clinton, in jarring detail. The stories only confirmed the impression Tripp had formed of the president. While still working at the White House, she had once seen a woman, Kathleen Willey, leaving the Oval Office flustered and slightly disheveled—Willey later told Tripp that Clinton had groped her. "He is a predator, by pattern," Tripp says today. She began to construct a record of Lewinsky's story, secretly recording hours of their telephone conversations. Believing that Clinton needed to be held accountable, she sought the counsel of Tony Snow, a friend from Bush White House days, who urged her to write a book and put her in touch with the conservative literary agent Lucianne Goldberg. But Tripp decided against writing a tell-all, opting instead for what she considered the honorable option—becoming a whistleblower.

Tripp shared her information with lawyers for Paula Jones, a woman from Clinton's Arkansas past who was suing him for sexual harassment, and

Peter J. Boyer is national correspondent at THE WEEKLY STANDARD.

USA BERG / AP / GETTY

then with the special counsel investigating the Whitewater scandals, Kenneth Starr. She assumed that when the Lewinsky information became public, most people would share her assessment of Clinton's behavior. It was a reasonable assumption. "If he's not telling the truth, he's done," ABC's Sam Donaldson said in the early days of the Lewinsky scandal in 1998.

But Donaldson, like Tripp and many others, underestimated the ability of the Clintons and their enablers to seize the narrative and to fashion from damning facts a defense.

The Clinton team's first strategy was to attack Lewinsky. Sidney Blumenthal, the former journalist and trusted confidant of Hillary Clinton, arranged a lunch with his friend the writer Christopher Hitchens in the hope of convincing him that Lewinsky was an unstable stalker. Appalled by the effort by the president and his team of smear artists, Hitchens filed an affidavit testifying to Blumenthal's effort. But the whispering campaign was hardly

subtle. It was widely enough known that Maureen Dowd wrote a *New York Times* column headlined "Liberties: The Slander Strategy."

"Inside the White House, the debate goes on about the best way to destroy That Woman, as the President called Monica Lewinsky," Dowd wrote. "Should they paint her as a friendly fantasist or a malicious stalker?" There were limits for even the most ardent Clinton supporters, though, Dowd noted: "At least some of the veteran Clinton shooters feel a little nauseated this time around, after smearing so many women who were probably telling the truth as trashy bimbos."

The strategy changed. The Lewinsky relationship was next a consensual affair between adults and a matter properly resolved within the privacy of the Clinton marriage.

"It was neither of those things," Tripp says. "It was not consensual, and it was not an affair. It was a servicing agreement on his part. She was a kid. She may have been 22 and had

a voluptuous body and was misguided in her choices, but emotionally, she was 15—a groupie. It reminded me of myself with the Beatles and the Dave Clark Five in the early '60s. That same obsession. To say that Monica Lewinsky was a woman at that point in her life was a stretch beyond comprehension."

The record would seem to support Tripp's assessment of the relationship. Lewinsky's grand jury appearance revealed that between November 1995 and March 1997, she met the president furtively in a hallway, a bathroom, and, once, while he talked on the phone with a member of Congress. They had six sexual encounters before they shared any meaningful conversation. "I asked him why he doesn't ask me any questions about myself," she said, "and . . . is this just about sex . . . or do you have some interest in trying to get to know me as a person?"

Hillary Clinton next shifted the narrative with a memorable appearance on NBC's *Today* show in January 1998, where she blamed the president's

## Giving Thanks To America's Small Businesses

**THOMAS J. DONOHUE**

PRESIDENT AND CEO  
U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Thanksgiving is a time for family, food, and football—but it's also the starting gun for the holiday shopping season. Many Americans hit the ground running last week with Black Friday, braving the crowds and traffic to visit their favorite stores for great deals. The following day, while maybe not as well known, was another nationally recognized day for shoppers: Small Business Saturday.

First observed in 2010, Small Business Saturday has become an important day to show our appreciation for the backbone of our nation's economy: small businesses. No matter where you live, you can be sure that your local community benefits greatly from the restaurants, retail stores, manufacturers, service providers, and other small businesses that create jobs and drive economic growth in your area. By designating

a day in their honor, we remind ourselves that these businesses rely on our patronage, especially during important consumer shopping seasons such as this.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce is proud to stand for millions of small businesses in communities all across America. We fight for their interests every day in Washington, D.C. on the big policy issues before our government, including tax reform, health care, regulatory reform, and so many others. But we also know that small business success begins and ends with customers. So this season, as you shop for that perfect gift, don't forget about the many small businesses that support your local economy and employ your friends and neighbors.

Today offers a prime opportunity to support them—without even leaving our homes. Cyber Monday is a day for excellent digital deals at online retailers large and small, including many stores in your community that you

might not even realize have an online presence. The Chamber's latest *Small Business Index* found that 81% of small businesses are online in some form, whether on social media, by selling through major online retailers, or with their own branded shopping websites.

Our *Index* also found that the holiday shopping season is important to many small businesses. Unfortunately, three-quarters of all small business owners report that holiday season revenue is either the same or lower than the rest of the year. All of us can help change that. Small Business Saturday may have passed, but together we can make *every* day a small business day. By dining at locally owned restaurants, shopping at small retailers, and visiting our community stores in person and online, every American can help support the small businesses that are pillars of our local economies.



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troubles on a “vast right-wing conspiracy.” The Lewinsky matter thus became a partisan political attack, with the real wrongdoing perpetrated by Republicans. When that narrative took hold, Tripp lost purchase on any claim as a straitlaced whistleblower. She became the prying, traitorous villain of a sordid story, an assessment neatly summed by Lewinsky herself at the conclusion of her grand jury testimony, when she said, “I hate Linda Tripp.”

Tripp says she has not spoken to Lewinsky in all these years but understands why she felt as she did. “Monica absolutely had to be seen, not just to others, but also to herself, as a bona fide girlfriend,” Tripp says. “She could not be seen as an orifice or a party to a situation where you call in someone for servicing and send them on their merry way.”

Still, Tripp remembers being stunned by the vilification directed at herself. She received death threats at the height of the scandal, prompting a move to a safe house. Her character was assassinated over and over, as was her appearance. *Saturday Night Live* had a running sketch in which John Goodman played her as a fat, prying busybody who casually betrays a friendship while gorging on junk food.

Tripp was fired from her Pentagon job on the last day of the Clinton administration. She sued the government, won a settlement, and then set out to start a new life.

She wanted, literally, to become a different Linda Tripp. She had two plastic surgeries and lost the weight she’d gained by stress eating during the scandal. She married a friend from childhood, the architect Dieter Rausch, and they took up the country life in Loudoun County, Virginia. They opened a specialty shop in Middleburg, a high-end holiday store called the Christmas Sleigh. She has avoided the press for most of the last 20 years, though the calls keep coming—“at least once a week.” The telephone at her store goes straight to voicemail, and her staff screens her emails, discarding most.

She decided to speak publicly about the renewed interest in Clinton’s sex

scandals, and her role in one of them, because of something that happened during a recent visit to her son’s family. The subject of Lewinsky came up, and her daughter-in-law urged her to resist talking publicly about the Clintons. “She said—and this was very, very painful to hear—that she didn’t want her own children to be defined by their last name.”

Tripp says she doesn’t expect that the current rush to reconsider

Clinton’s behavior will extend to her and her motives. “I’ll still be the evil witch,” she says. “You know, you can’t unring that bell.”

But she says that she is wholly comfortable with the role she played in the Lewinsky matter. And she repeated what she told her daughter-in-law: “I said I did the right thing. I may have done the right thing the wrong way, but I did the right thing. And I would do it again.” ♦

# Good Luck Doing the Right Thing

The cultural contradictions of modern liberalism.

BY BARTON SWAIM

In *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976) Daniel Bell argued that modern capitalism abetted two conflicting tendencies: It encouraged hedonistic self-gratification in the cultural sphere while needing sober hard-working adults in the economic sphere. A defect in the thesis is that there is arguably no such thing as capitalism; it’s not a system devised by anyone and so doesn’t deserve the “ism.” To the extent it refers to markets and profits, “capitalism” is the default way people organize themselves in a complex society. It’s natural, but not ideal or perfect. Bell might have written a much longer book on the cultural contradictions of human nature.

Modern liberalism, though, is very much an intentionally devised system. (That’s modern and not classical liberalism; the latter is something closer to capitalism.) Modern liberalism is a loosely configured set of ideas and attitudes, and it does not dominate and define the whole of our society in the way many cultural critics used to say (and still say) “capitalism” dominates

and defines modern America. But it is a consciously devised system of belief all the same. Modern liberalism holds that the highest aim of government is to encourage and protect personal autonomy. The individual must have absolute freedom to think and believe and act as he or she wishes, and he or she must not be hindered unless the autonomy of another is threatened. J.S. Mill put it succinctly in his little book *On Liberty*: “the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection.” The only reason to abridge a person’s freedom, in this view, is in order to stop that person from harming or abridging the freedom of another.

That’s at least what modern liberalism is supposed to mean, but in fact modern liberals don’t hold to Mill’s doctrine—because the doctrine is literally inhuman. Humans judge, they approve and disapprove, they believe in right and wrong ways of doing things, they like to live among people who do things their way and not the wrong way, and they are not capable of establishing a society in which no one

Barton Swaim is the opinion editor of THE WEEKLY STANDARD.

interferes with the liberty of another except when someone may be harmed.

Modern liberals may think they believe this, and some get closer than others, but hardly anyone really does. What modern liberals believe instead is that a clerisy, an educated elite that favors personal autonomy and open-mindedness and fairness, should write the rules for everybody else.

Today's liberal elite do not look backward for their authority—there are no scriptures and no inviolable traditions in modern liberalism. They look to the future. The rules issuing from the modern liberal clerisy are thought to be the latest manifestation of moral progress, to which educated people must adhere if they wish to be thought of as good people. So for instance American liberals can, in the space of a decade or even less, go from believing marriage is a sacred institution between one man and one woman (Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama said they believed this) to holding that it's a contract between two people who love each other, even if those two people are of the same sex. They can embrace the latter doctrine just as fervently as they did the earlier one.

The real trouble with this system is that the clerisy, in its enthusiasm to keep up with the times, issues new rules that contradict the old rules. The conflicting nature of its demands is not news, but of late those contradictions have become acute and more obvious.

For decades and in a variety of media, Americans were assured by their cultural leaders that sexual relations are a matter of personal preference and desire, bounded only by consent. The old rules requiring monogamy no longer applied. Men and women need sex for personal fulfillment. The sexual urge was not meant to be suppressed but to flourish; only by that means would men and women be able to express themselves to the fullest and become who they really were.

With that dictum, men hit the jackpot. That's what they had always wanted anyway. So they went about obeying the new rules with great

enthusiasm. And with the institution of marriage pushed to the periphery, it was fun and interesting and easy to abide by the updated morality. But there were problems. Men were told that it was not proper to initiate sexual contact with women except under certain circumstances. The woman has to consent. But what does that mean, exactly? Because sometimes she doesn't consent, and then she does, and vice versa. In the last decade we have seen a desperate effort, by universities especially, to deal with the ambiguities of consent, to eliminate shades of gray. California even passed a law requiring verbal or written expressions of consent before sexual activity might licitly proceed between students at the state's universities. The lawmakers seemed to want something resembling a public avowal of honorable intentions, minus the lifelong fidelity that used to accompany such vows.

So more rules were handed down to perfect the imperfections, and the rules began to seem convoluted and arbitrary. The contradictions became embedded in modern life: We were encouraged to talk more openly about sex; companies could advertise their products with sexual enticements; the sex act could be shown on television and in movies; desires were meant to be pursued. But if men were to initiate contact in the wrong way, they might be made to suffer severe consequences.

One outcome was that only men of enormous power and influence—politicians, entertainers, Hollywood producers—were able to abide by the first set of rules, the ones allowing sexual license, and flout the new set of rules, the regulations on harassment. They did this by intimidating and blackmailing their female subordinates. Only now have the women they manhandled and brutalized gathered the courage to denounce them en masse.

Or consider race. Long ago the liberal clerisy began telling us that everything comes down to race. Racial diversity became an important criterion in college admissions and professional advance, and in time it became an obsession affecting every area of political and cultural life. We were to

value and “celebrate” racial diversity; we were to discuss differences endlessly; we were to assess institutions and ideas and works of art according to racial concepts and descriptors.

But there were other, conflicting rules handed down by the same clerisy. Those rules said we *weren't* to discuss race in any insensitive way. Certain words were outlawed, subjects were made taboo, ideas that impinged on racial relations could be handled only with extreme delicacy, and remarks that sounded like they might be about racial characteristics, even if they weren't, were strictly forbidden. (Alas, one has to describe many of these developments in the passive voice, because it's often not clear when new rules enter the public sphere and who the issuing authorities are. Such is the mystery of the modern liberal clerisy.)

“Gender” is another area governed by changing and contradictory rules. For a long time we were made to think that women's equality was among the most important political goals of right-thinking people; the world was no longer to be governed by men but by women and men in partnership, because women bring a distinctive and valuable sensibility to our politics and economy that can make us stronger and more humane. Women writers and artists were taught to schoolchildren and college students for the same reason. Femininity, not the faux femininity imposed on women by generations of men but genuine femininity, would, when embraced and allowed to flourish, change society for the better.

But in the last few years, we have learned that the differences between men and women are arbitrarily imposed. Masculinity and femininity are social constructs. There are many other categories of sexuality; and in fact the number of “gender” identities may reach 50 or 60 or 100. If that's true, then much of what we've been doing, and doing at the behest of and in order to please our liberal clerisy, is misguided and maybe destructive. Our entire society, from schooling and sports to clothing and artistic production, is based on the two-sex “model,” but now we're told that these sexes are



mere social conventions, high-handedly “assigned” at birth, and that we are damaging young people by insisting they identify with one or the other.

You don’t have to fully reject or embrace any of these rules to feel ill-treated. Ordinary people sense, and have sensed for a long time, that they are being put in an impossible position—that full participation in their communities requires abiding by constantly changing conventions and that they may be faulted or ridiculed or worse should they fail to adhere to the ever-changing rules.

Of course, no one knows where these developments will lead, and American society is so vast and complex and multilayered that you could make several different cases about the future and probably be right. But it’s hard to believe there won’t be some sort of reaction against the incessantly changing demands of modern liberalism and a move toward something that holds our public life together in a coherent and stable way.

We may as well come back to Daniel Bell, specifically to a curious paragraph at the end of the first part of his book, the part describing the “double bind” of capitalism. “Despite the shambles of modern culture,” he wrote,

Some religious answer will surely be forthcoming. . . . It is a constitutive part of man’s consciousness: the cognitive search for the pattern of the “general order” of existence; the affective need to establish rituals and to make such conceptions sacred; the primordial need for relatedness to some others, or a set of meanings which will establish a transcendent response to the self; and the existential need to confront the finalities of suffering and death.

Bell was both right and wrong in his analysis of capitalism. But he was surely right that when people are placed under a contradictory set of demands that they don’t understand, they may reject the whole system and look for something they can make sense of. My guess is that we’ve begun to see that rejection, and we’re about to see more of it. ♦

# The Inevitable Outcome of the '60s

Charles Manson, 1934-2017.

BY HENRY ALLEN

When I got back from India in April 1969, I knew instantly everything had changed. A '60s commando with a backpack, I could feel it even before I got out of Kennedy Airport: an aura of resentment, a light smog of paranoia, a lurch in the American vibe I’d left the year before when everything seemed possible even if it wasn’t quite real.

In my naïveté, I hadn’t foreseen

his Los Angeles slaughter. On the surface, the words are a sort of love song, but the music has all the grace of a car crusher. What were the Beatles telling us?

There had been craziness before I left: the Kennedy assassinations, the Vietnam protests, the riot at the '68 Democratic convention in Chicago. But they had all felt unreal, accidents amid the natural summers of love, the communes, the wondrous music, the mystical enlightenment in pills, the children with names like Morning Moon.

But that April, the older bits of craziness seemed not accidental but byproducts of something that had been building for years. Bummer, as we’d say back then, a bummer with inevitabilities such as Manson or others like him.

Southern California was their place. I already knew about the evil that lurked there the way it lurks in all lotus lands. (Don’t camp in the canyons, man.)

It turned out later that year we were witnessing another tragedy of the Rousseauian legacy, another twitch in the corpse of the French Revolution and the belief that we had to destroy civilization in order to save it. Acid-heads had become politicians, freaks became criminals, self-pity became paranoia. As Manson would say, “Total paranoia is total awareness.”

The final Aquarian apocalypse would happen in December at a rock concert at Altamont Speedway where the Hells Angels beat people with pool cues and stabbed a fan to death



Charles Manson arrives at the Los Angeles city jail in 1969.

that among the possibilities was Charles Manson.

For the moment, I puzzled over the new American flag decals I saw on car windows—America had never been a flag-waving country, and these flags seemed to be flying as much out of rage as pride.

The next day I heard the Beatles’ *White Album*, which stymied me with its moments of chaos and aggression. Think of “Helter Skelter,” which became not just a theme song but a political philosophy for Manson and

Henry Allen won the Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 2000. His new book is *Where We Lived*, a chronicle of family houses and their inhabitants since 1557.

during a set by the Rolling Stones. The Stones had seemed to think they could get away with just showing “Sympathy for the Devil,” but the devil will have his due.

In August, the agent of the archfiend was Manson with his charisma and appeal to helter-skelter hybristophilics, bad girls from good families who found sexual arousal in crime, outrage, and horror.

There’s a banality here: The agent could have been anyone, when you consider that Manson was a 5-foot-2, semiliterate jail-raped punk still dreaming of becoming a rock star in his mid-30s in a city where, as Dionne Warwick sang in 1968:

All the stars that never were  
Are parking cars and pumping gas.

Manson had the knack of appealing to Hollywood celebrities. Back then, madness seemed like a kind of super-truth and so he bore an air of prophecy. Imagine his bitterness when they did his music career no good at all. He turned to the ultimate banality of the age: revolution. Manson took “Helter Skelter” and other Beatles songs as the foretelling of a race war soon to come. He predicted that the blacks would kill all the whites, then find they were unable to govern themselves.

Manson and his “Family” would arise from hideouts in Death Valley and take power. All he had to do was get the race war started.

He ordered his followers to go on a killing spree, leaving fake clues that the killers were black militants. The most famous of their victims was the impossibly beautiful Sharon Tate, eight-months pregnant and the wife of Roman Polanski (living now in Europe to avoid charges of raping and sodomizing a 13-year-old in Los Angeles).

In that summer of 1969, there was the vast but momentary promise of Woodstock, a music festival, all peace and love. Joni Mitchell compared it to Eden.

We are stardust  
We are golden  
And we’ve got to get ourselves  
Back to the Garden.

The bible was *The Whole Earth Catalog*, which preached the odd combination of communes and rugged individualism. Its opening line and motto was “We are as gods and might as well get good at it.” Did the editor, Stewart Brand, hear the echo of the serpent tempting Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit? *Ye shall be as gods*.

In prison, Manson retained his fascination. Women sent him love letters; writers turned out endless books. There were movies, even an opera.

I suspect that the fascination springs from our deep suspicion that innate depravity explains us better than Rousseauian liberation. Civilization’s job is suppressing that

depravity, but the ’60s presented a cadre of liberationists who set out to suppress civilization. Therefore Manson. Therefore Altamont, et al. The depravity doctrine has been banned and buried by liberal intelligentsia who believe in perfectibility and don’t, apparently, read newspapers.

Given the number of headlines about Manson’s death at 83 in a prison hospital on November 19, you can see that the fascination lives on. One of Manson’s women, Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme, had not taken part in the murders but years later, still a Manson devotee, she’d make up for it by trying to assassinate President Gerald Ford. Keep the faith, baby. ♦

# All Is Forgiven

As the partisan wheel turns.

BY NOEMIE EMERY

Of course the supporters of Roy Moore, the Republican Senate candidate in Alabama, are standing by their candidate, despite credible charges of sexual misconduct involving underage girls. That is what partisans do. They avow principles that they say they will never surrender, then anoint leaders who violate those same principles, then go on to defend their champions until their very last breath, denying the bad behavior and even the fact that a problem exists.

These dilemmas were rare with the statesmen of generations past, who busied themselves with issues like taxing and spending or war and peace, but in our era of culture-war combat, in which the “moral high ground” is fervently fought for and hotly disputed, they have blossomed apace. Donald Trump and Roy Moore and the social conservatives, Edward M. Kennedy and the women’s rights

movement, Robert Packwood and the abortion activists, President Bill Clinton and the Anita Hill-era school of anti-sexual harassment crusaders—the gap between what partisans say they believe and the way they conduct themselves boggles and staggers the mind. How did we come to this strange moment? Let us look backwards and see.

Politics make strange bedfellows, but none have been stranger than the romance of the dowdy and earnest and buttoned-up feminists of the 1980s-90s with the un-put-together Ted Kennedy, a user of women if ever there was one, whose drunken exploits were legion, and who, as some people remember, once left a woman to drown in the car he had driven into a pond. His level of respect for women who did not engage with him in transactional politics was described by the late Michael Kelly in *GQ* in an article that caused a sensation in 1990 when it was published, and that contained little gems such as these: “A former mid-level Kennedy staffer . . . recalls with

Noemie Emery is a contributing editor to THE WEEKLY STANDARD and a columnist for the Washington Examiner.



disgust one (now ex-) high-ranking aide as a ‘pimp . . . whose real position was to procure women for Kennedy,’” and “In December 1985 . . . Kennedy allegedly manhandled a pretty young woman employed as a Brasserie waitress,” picking her up and throwing her on top of a table, and then into the lap of Senator Christopher Dodd, his dinner companion, and “rubbing his genital area against hers, supporting his weight on the arms of the chair.”

Acts such as these would have brought calls to resign if he had been conservative, but the feminists’ love for their senator never abated, and he went to his grave as their guardian angel, a man who had the interests of their sex at heart. Second to him in the hearts of the movement was Sen. Robert Packwood of Oregon, the rare Republican who was also an abortion-rights absolutist, a friend and ally of Gloria Steinem, who raised campaign funds for him in the 1980s, even when his aggressions were privately known. His double life as the feminists’ friend and as a chronic molester of female associates was blown apart by a piece in the *Washington Post* on November 22, 1992, just a few weeks after he had been safely elected to his fifth term in the Senate. But with the election of Bill Clinton as president, Packwood’s vote was less important and his usefulness to the cause was less clear. The article stressed the puzzling difference between his ardent support of the feminist movement and his predation towards females one-on-one. “Our reporting identified more than 40 women whose lives had been negatively affected by the Senator’s actions,” the lead reporter, Florence George Graves, recalled later in *Nieman Reports*. “Seventeen chose to testify during the subsequent Senate Select Committee on Ethics investigation, and several said they’d been terrified by his advances. Some allegations were tantamount to sexual



Packwood in 1992

assault.” The timing seemed perfect for feminists, who could strike against Packwood without losing power, leaving him bewildered as to why his charmed life had vanished. But another feminist hero would soon come to be outed, the stakes would be far higher, and the outcome would not be the same.

Since at least 1991, the year of the Clarence Thomas hearings, feminist women and their male allies in power had professed fervent belief in several unshakable convictions: Workplace harassment was always abhorrent, the word of the woman must always be taken, and women, of course, never lied. Then President Bill Clinton himself was accused of harassment, and all the rules, at least for the sisters, turned on a dime: Sympathy went to the man with the power, and women, it turned out, could and did lie all the time. In *Vanity Fair*, the late and much missed Marjorie Williams chronicled the reactions of feminists to the news that Clinton had been accused of groping by Kathleen Willey, a volunteer in his White House; with rape by Juanita Broadrick, who had been an Arkansas state employee in the late 1970s; and of carrying on an affair with a pretty young intern who delivered a pizza to the Oval Office during a government shutdown and thus caught his eye. “She put the moves on HIM,” Susan Faludi would say of the intern. “We do not know what happened,” said an officer of the National Organization for Women. “I simply don’t care,” pioneering feminist Betty Friedan would offer. Writer Anne Roiphe gave the most honest answer: “It will be a great pity if the Democratic Party is damaged by this,” she opined. This was their view through the course of the scandals, even when Clinton confessed he had lied to the country and that the stories about him and the intern were true. Feminists gulped but rallied round Hillary, who as the put-upon woman

was still standing behind him. And when the impeachment trial was over, they all returned to their place at Bill’s side, too.

“Organized women’s groups overlooked a lot to stand by the senator from Massachusetts,” Eleanor Clift admitted in *Newsweek* when Edward Kennedy died in 2009. “Feminists who proclaimed ‘The personal is the political’ made an exception for Kennedy. They argued that the political outweighs the personal. . . . Women who agreed with his politics . . . valued the way he advanced their interests” though he had “done things they found reprehensible.” There were flickers of doubt during his nephew’s 1991 trial for rape. The events in question were set in motion by the 60ish senator, when he roused his nephew and son out of bed to go bar-hopping with him in Palm Beach, and then back at home wandered around in his nightshirt with an addled expression, chatting distractedly with his son and a girlfriend while his nephew indulged in the disputed activities outside with his female companion (he was acquitted).

But that moment had passed quickly—and they forgave even more for Bill Clinton, in part because of his support of their issues and perhaps even more for the sake of his first lady, whom they hoped to elect as the first woman president and whose fate was entwined with his own. But when Hillary did run, she would find herself faced with that rare man whose reputation was perhaps even worse than that of her husband. And the Republican party would find itself facing a Clintonesque bind of its own.

During the Clinton years, and in part as a reaction to them, an outrage machine had grown on the right, feeding on all of the Clintons’ varied transgressions, which it saw in a sinister light. This virtuecrat caucus emerged as a critical wing of the party, with a religious arm in the evangelical churches and a secular one in the talkers and writers who kept a close eye on the culture for wardrobe malfunctions and other signs of general rot, of which there is never a shortage. During these

JENNIFER LAW / AFP / GETTY

years, books appeared by the ton, blasting the Clintons less for policy stands than for moral corruption, and this was even before the sex scandals erupted. Comparisons to the Macbeths were too flattering. William J. Bennett, who had made his deserved good name as Ronald Reagan's secretary of Education and then as President George H.W. Bush's first drug czar, reinvented himself as a moralist, tossing off a series of books prominently featuring in their titles words like *moral compass*, *moral poverty*, *moral collapse*, and *virtue*—this last one a trait he found lacking in the first couple. “If you don’t disassociate yourself from Clinton, you will make a pact with the devil” was how, in a 2001 *Larry King* appearance, he described the advice he had given to Democrats during the impeachment commotion. “They are corrupting themselves, they are corrupting others, they are a disgrace to this country,” he said.

The verdict was clear: Clinton was a lout and a lecher of a sort the party of Lincoln would never tolerate. Then came 2016, and the Republican party found itself tied to its very own lout and lecher. And all of a sudden, a very large bloc of conservative purists had some very strong second thoughts. All of a sudden they found that an ex-Democrat, an ex-friend of abortion who had funded Chuck Schumer and both of the Clintons, mocked almost all the conservative tenets, and led a Page Six-style private life was really the man of their dreams. All of a sudden, many evangelicals found that greed, lust, and blasphemy were not a problem and the lack of biblical, and even the commonplace, virtues was not that important. What of the coarseness, the lies, the mocking of heroes? They were refreshing. The many adulteries? He was in good company: Franklin D. Roosevelt, John Kennedy, and even King David had committed adultery, too.

In *The Death of Outrage* (1998), Bennett had written,

On Bill Clinton’s behalf, in his defense, many bad ideas are being put into widespread circulation. It is said that private character has virtually no impact on governing

character . . . that America needs to become more European (read: more “sophisticated”) in its attitude toward sex . . . that we shouldn’t be “judgmental,” that it is inappropriate to make preliminary judgments about the president’s conduct because he hasn’t been found guilty in a court of law. . . . If these arguments take root in American soil—if they become the coin of the public realm—we will have validated them, and we will come to rue the day we did.

In 2016, Bennett would say in defense of Trump that “too many people are on their high horse” and of Roy

Moore that “it’s not up to me . . . to decide this.”

One could say outrage has died in Bennett and large swaths of conservative America just as it clearly died on the left many years earlier, only to be resurrected when it can be used to beat up on others, with whom they have never agreed. This is called “selective outrage,” which is the worst kind on offer, or “situational ethics,” which means that whatever helps your situation is assumed to be ethical. It’s not a nice picture, but perhaps not the worst that can happen. Without situational ethics, we might have no ethics at all. ♦

# The Man with Trump’s Peace Plan

Meet Jason Greenblatt.

BY MICHAEL WARREN

Donald Trump is confident he can get a comprehensive agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. As one diplomat in Washington recently put it, the president is more optimistic than anyone else for peace in the Middle East. Trump told Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority, during his visit to the White House in May, “I want to support you in being the Palestinian leader who signs his name to the final and most important peace agreement that brings safety, stability, and prosperity to both peoples and to the region.”

As Trump’s first year in office comes to an end, some of his closest advisers are preparing to release a plan to resolve an issue that has vexed American administrations for decades. The White House has been tight-lipped about the ideas being discussed as part of its peace plan or even

when to expect it. Two policy experts who have consulted with administration officials say the team was preparing to circulate a draft as early as mid-December, something the White House now denies.

“There has never been and still isn’t a timetable to present our ideas,” says one White House official. “We have never set a time frame and have consistently stated we are not going to set artificial deadlines. The goal is to get this right and to do that we need flexibility.”

Flexibility has been a scarce resource in past Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, but the Trump administration has reason to believe there’s more of it today. For starters, there’s the president’s close relationship with Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and a level of trust between the two countries that was almost entirely absent during the Obama administration. There are also warmer relations between United States and some of the surrounding

Michael Warren is a senior writer at THE WEEKLY STANDARD.



Arab states—prompted by the recognition of the common threat of a nuclear Iran. The White House sees a chance to engage with the Palestinians but believes seizing this opportunity requires something more than another toothless peace proposal.

“We don’t want to be in a position where we present a two- or three-page framework. The parties generally agree. Then we find out six months later, the whole thing blows up,” says a senior administration official. “We’re really trying hard, and the reason it’s taking so long is to make something more significant . . . something more comprehensive.”

Leading Trump’s effort is a triumvirate of Orthodox Jews: Jared Kushner, the president’s son-in-law; David Friedman, the U.S. ambassador to Israel; and Jason Greenblatt, a Trump Organization lawyer who was tapped as the president’s “special representative for international negotiations.” Other principals on the team include deputy national security adviser Dina Powell and Donald Blome, the U.S. consul general in Jerusalem.

Based in Tel Aviv, Friedman has the most direct contact with the Israelis, while Kushner has cultivated relationships with the Gulf Arab states—most recently leading a White House trip (which included Greenblatt and Powell) to Saudi Arabia, the third time Kushner has visited the country this year. But much of the staff work of the Mideast peace team runs through Greenblatt’s office in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building. He directs an interagency team, including National Security Council and State Department staff. Greenblatt reports to Kushner and, of course, the president—not, as his predecessors in previous administrations have done, to the secretary of state. This Trump effort to solve peace in the Middle East is primarily a White House initiative.

A 50-year-old father of six, Greenblatt hasn’t fully moved to Washington from Teaneck, New Jersey, where his family is part of a large Modern Orthodox community. His wife and kids travel south nearly every week to

join him for Shabbat in the nation’s capital. Greenblatt has long been a regular visitor to Israel; he and his wife, Naomi, have even written a book on traveling there, *Israel for Families* (2015). “I do rely on him as a consultant on Israel,” Trump told a group of Jewish reporters during his 2016 campaign. “He’s a person who truly loves



Jason Greenblatt

Israel. I love to get advice from people that know Israel, but from people that truly love Israel.” And Trump trusts him as a 20-year veteran of his real-estate company.

Greenblatt came to the White House job with no diplomatic experience. The selection was greeted by many in Washington with skepticism. But others say Greenblatt brings a much-needed outsider’s perspective unencumbered by preconceptions about what can and cannot be accomplished in peace negotiations. “I think he kind of brings a fresh approach. He’s a very good listener. I think he’s got a great temperament,” says Ron Dermer, the Israeli ambassador to the United States.

“He’s talked to an awful lot of people,” says Elliott Abrams, who was a deputy national security adviser in charge of Middle East issues in George W. Bush’s White House. “He has reached out here in Washington to educate himself. If you’re an intelligent person and you have bathed in this for a year, you’re going to learn a lot.”

Part of Greenblatt’s education has come from his seven official visits to

Israel in 2017, on top of trips to other countries in the region. He regularly meets with Israeli, Palestinian, and Arab leaders. Those meetings supplement what the administration believes is a relationship of mutual trust with Israel and the Netanyahu government.

“Jason has the unique ability to be both an ardent defender of Israel and a fair mediator at the same time,” says David Friedman. “He has infinite patience to hear and understand the views of all parties, but he never loses sight of America’s unbreakable bond to Israel and the U.S. national interest in seeing that Israel’s security and stability never be placed at risk.”

Getting a viable peace proposal together also means mediating between opposing views within the administration. The White House maintains that Israel’s security is the top priority for any plan, but there are disagreements about what this means. There are advocates for the withdrawal of Israel Defense Forces (IDF) stationed in border areas like the Palestinian-controlled West Bank and Israel’s side of the Jordan Valley, replacing them with some kind of multinational force and more security technology. This was a major provision of a plan drafted by Marine general John Allen during failed 2013-14 peace talks, and some sources say the idea has been raised in the White House again in 2017.

An IDF withdrawal is almost certainly a step too far for Netanyahu, and it has plenty of critics on the Trump team. One administration official insists no such measure has even “been discussed internally.” “Israel’s security needs will be addressed in any proposal and the Allen plan is not being looked at or considered and anybody who is telling you otherwise is completely misinformed,” says the official.

Developments in the region are likely to alter whatever plans are being made for renewed negotiations. The recent upheaval in the Saudi government is one unknown, although the success of Mohammad bin Salman’s consolidation of power may portend well for the American effort—the

JAMFAR ASHTINEH / AFP / GETTY

crown prince and Kushner are close allies. The latest attempt at reconciliation between Hamas, the Palestinian terrorist group that effectively controls Gaza, and Fatah, the ruling party of the Palestinian Authority, is a larger question mark. And the corruption scandals plaguing Netanyahu and his political allies make his coalition government's future uncertain.

Until the details of the still-forming peace plan are known, it's impossible to evaluate how likely any Trump effort is to succeed. It's thought that the administration will propose a version of the two-state solution with an independent Palestinian state that has been U.S. policy since the George W.

Bush presidency. But Trump's willingness to entertain publicly just about any idea makes the situation hard to read. "I'm looking at two-state and one-state, and I like the one that both parties like. I'm very happy with the one that both parties like," he said in February.

Critics see statements like that as a sign the Trump team has little appreciation for the history of peace negotiations and is making a naïve effort. But others see hope in Trump's disruptive and pragmatic approach. "The greatest book about America was written by a Frenchman," says Dermer, "and so sometimes having an outsider's perspective helps." ♦

# Buy Fijian

There's a whole world in the president's water bottle. BY SCOTT LINCICOME

Donald Trump's recent recap of his 12-day, five-nation trip to Asia was overshadowed by, in typical 2017 fashion, something seemingly extraneous: the president's sip from a bottle of Fiji Water in the middle of his address. Political media and late-night comedians seized upon this unscripted moment to point out the hypocrisy of a man who often mocked Senator Marco Rubio's similar episode of awkward, mid-speech hydration. Less noticed, however, was the fact that just by drinking some water, the president had unwittingly debunked a central tenet of his "America First" trade policy.

One of the most—if not the only—consistent aspects of President Trump's public policy is a mercantilist desire to reduce America's trade deficits. It was a common refrain of the Trump campaign and hasn't

dipped in popularity since the man took office. In his Asia speech, Trump mentioned trade deficits three times, indicating on each occasion that their diminution is a primary objective of his administration. In short, he argues, because the United States imports more from certain countries—in this speech, China and South Korea—than it exports to them, we are "losing at trade" due to those countries' cunning manipulation of our market access generosity.

Unfortunately, the president's rhetoric is as myopic and misguided as it is incessant, and his clumsy swig of Fiji Water lucidly demonstrated why.

The United States has a persistent trade deficit in goods with Fiji, totaling approximately \$150 million in 2016 and on pace to exceed that this year, according to the latest Census Bureau data. Much of that imbalance is due to imports of Fiji Water, which is bottled

in the tiny island nation: According to the State Department, bottled water is one of the top three items we import therefrom. Indeed, Fiji is the number-one bottled water imported into the United States these days.

Does this mean, as President Trump often says, that America is "losing at trade" with Fiji, that the nation is treating us "very unfairly" and costing us American jobs, and that imported Fiji Water is to blame?

Of course not. In fact, it's just the opposite.

First, Fiji Water is owned by the Los Angeles-based Wonderful Company, a \$4 billion food conglomerate with thousands of American employees. A quick search of the company's job-listings shows several California-based openings with Fiji Water, in areas like marketing, sales, supply chain management, and transportation. Thus, every bottle of Fiji Water imported—each adding to that big-and-supposedly-bad trade deficit—supports American jobs along with Fijian ones. Every dollar earned from sales of Fiji Water goes not only to those workers but to the American owners of the company (and to the U.S. and Fijian economies more broadly).

And those are only the direct benefits. As with all imported retail goods, U.S. sales of Fiji Water support tens of thousands of American employees (and American companies) who work every day to get that water from a ship in the Pacific Ocean to the president's lips. Transportation, wholesale trade, and retail sales—there's an entire ecosystem built up around imports and the global trading system.

Second, some quick research reveals that each bottle of Fiji Water is itself part of a pretty complex global supply chain. The bottles are made in Fiji (along with the water, of course) from plastic pellets produced in Thailand; the caps are made in Taiwan; the labels and shrinkwrap are made in New Zealand and Australia; the cardboard shipping pallets



*Scott Lincicome is an international trade attorney, adjunct scholar with the Cato Institute, and visiting lecturer at Duke University. The views expressed are his own.*



are made in the South Pacific. Thus each bottle of Fiji Water has value added from all over the world, not just Fiji—an important fact totally hidden in a statement of gross trade balance, which treats a good or service as if it were wholly produced in the listed country of origin. These supply-chain complexities are why groups like the World Trade Organization have created databases that track actual trade in value-added and a big reason no serious trade expert looks to gross balances to assess a trading relationship.

Such a dynamic is common in today's complex global economy. One famous study of the iPhone found that while each device imported into the United States from China accounted for around \$300 of our trade deficit, Chinese suppliers earned only about \$10 from the item's production and shipment. California-based Apple and its domestic affiliates, meanwhile,

receive hundreds of dollars from an iPhone's final U.S. sale (for things like design, marketing, retail sales, and even some manufacturing). President Trump's trade team misses all this and instead treats trade balances like a scoreboard and imports like the *other team's* points.

So a simple bottle of Fiji Water isn't just a small addition to an ever-growing list of silly presidential moments; it actually shows how imports can benefit U.S. consumers *and* workers, how global trade is win-win, how the U.S. trade balance with Fiji or any other country is an almost worthless barometer for assessing economic policies, and how dangerously incorrect the president's views on trade are. Political journalists who neither study nor make U.S. trade policy can be forgiven for missing these basic economic realities. The White House, on the other hand, has no excuse. ♦

More than 50 years ago, Ronald Reagan said, "A government agency is the nearest thing to eternal life we'll ever see on this earth." As if to prove him right, the federal government has added six cabinet-level departments since then while shedding only one, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, which morphed into two departments in 1979.

Republicans love running for office on the idea of abolishing unnecessary or duplicative agencies and departments. Who can forget Energy secretary Rick Perry's "oops" moment in 2011 when, as governor of Texas running for president, he promised he'd cut "three agencies of the government when I get there. . . . Commerce, Education, and the uh, uh, what's the third one there?"

Perry's forgetful moment is an appropriate metaphor for the amnesia that develops when Republicans win elections: They forget to make the cuts. In 2016, the one agency that the Republican platform favored abolishing was . . . the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB). The platform called it "the worst of Dodd-Frank" financial reforms in 2010, "designed to be a rogue agency."

In its short history, the CFPB has compiled a long list of overreaches, imposing new burdens on lenders and auto dealers and collecting millions of bits of consumer data to comb for perceived injustices, even if it can't quite prove actual harm.

Most of its excesses spring from its unique structure. When they passed the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act on a party-line vote, Democrats designed the CFPB to be politically untouchable. It draws its funding not from congressional appropriations but from the Federal Reserve. The president appoints the bureau's director to a five-year term and can remove him only for cause.

With a funding stream independent of the legislative branch and almost no accountability to the executive branch, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau is the rare government agency that can act with near impunity. Its mandate is to enforce 18 federal

# The Ultimate in Deregulation

## Kill the CFPB.

BY TONY MECIA

**I**n the first 10 months of the Trump presidency, the blueprint for peeling back regulations has looked something like this:

First, issue executive orders freezing overzealous excesses from the Obama years. Recall the flurry of signing ceremonies in January and February. Check.

Second, appoint reform-minded outsiders to head federal departments, who then begin the delicate work of undoing the most burdensome regulations. See, for example, Scott Pruitt at the Environmental Protection Agency, Ryan Zinke at Interior, and

Betsy DeVos at Education. Check.

Attacking regulations has been one of the Trump administration's few unambiguous successes, but that agenda is subject to overnight reversal the next time a Democratic administration comes to town. To prevent that will require a third act that offers more permanence: getting rid of government agencies.

It makes sense to start with one that's highly political yet insulated from political accountability: the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. The agency's director, Richard Cordray, is stepping down at the end of November. What better time to reassess the future of the agency—and ask whether we really need it at all?

*Tony Mecia is a senior writer at THE WEEKLY STANDARD.*

laws, educate consumers, and prohibit “unfair, deceptive, or abusive acts or practices.” That last vague mandate has been particularly troublesome—especially since the bureau’s aggressive interpretations are mostly beyond the oversight of elected officials. Republicans say the CFPB has ignored congressional subpoenas and shrugged off questions about massive cost overruns at its new Washington headquarters.

The bureau’s anti-business posture has real costs, particularly for smaller companies that cannot afford expensive lawyers to advise them about unpredictable risks. Testifying before Congress in March, David Motley, president of Colonial Savings in Fort Worth, told members of a financial services subcommittee that “too often it is unclear how the CFPB interprets a particular statute until an enforcement action or even multiple enforcement actions have occurred. Rather than responding proactively to a rule or guidance, financial institutions can only pay for considerably more counsel and compliance advice and hope they are not used to exemplify noncompliant behavior.” By imposing compliance costs on smaller companies, the bureau stifles innovation that benefits consumers.

Supporters of the bureau claim increased regulations are necessary to prevent the next financial meltdown, repeating the conceit that Washington regulators could have stopped the 2008 crisis if only they had enjoyed greater power. That’s not clear, but in any event, many of the bureau’s proposed regulations—such as banning banks from inserting arbitration clauses in contracts, to the benefit of trial lawyers—have nothing to do with financial stability. (Congress voted in October to set that rule aside.)

It’s not even clear that everyday financial products sold to consumers even deserve added scrutiny from government. Thaya Brook Knight of the Cato Institute says the bureau’s approach to consumer finance reminds her of the talking Barbie doll in the early 1990s that was roundly criticized for lowering academic expectations for girls by saying, “Math class is tough!”

“We’re saying the same thing to the American people,” she says. “We have complex financial products. The solution is not to say, ‘Oh, these things are really hard, people can’t deal with them on their own.’ We need to say, ‘We are all capable of dealing with this, we just need to figure it out.’ . . . There are ways to figure out the right thing without having a government agency tell-



**The CFPB’s anti-business posture has real costs, particularly for smaller companies that cannot afford expensive lawyers to advise them about unpredictable risks.**

ing you.” That seems particularly true in an era when consumers have more access to information than ever before.

Federal laws, of course, should be enforced. Banks are already regulated by, among others, the Federal Reserve, the Treasury Department, and state agencies. Fraud is already policed by the Federal Trade Commission. Fair housing laws already fall under the jurisdiction of the Department of Housing and Urban Development. There are plenty of regulators in place, just as there were before the CFPB came on the scene wielding new powers in 2010.

Meanwhile, the courts are all but inviting Congress to overhaul the bureau’s structure. In October 2016, in a case in which the bureau was accused of applying an interpretation retroactively, a three-judge panel of the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the

bureau’s structure is unconstitutional because its director is unaccountable:

When measured in terms of unilateral power, the Director of the CFPB is the single most powerful official in the entire U.S. Government, other than the President. Indeed, within his jurisdiction, the Director of the CFPB can be considered even more powerful than the President. . . . The concentration of massive, unchecked power in a single Director marks a departure from settled historical practice and makes the CFPB unique among traditional independent agencies.

The case is under appeal to the full circuit court.

Even people who helped create the bureau are having second thoughts. Writing in the *Wall Street Journal* in November, a former aide to then-Rep. Barney Frank acknowledged it was a mistake to invest so much power in a single individual. “The authors wanted the bureau to be a fair arbiter of protecting consumers, instead of what it has become—a politically biased regulatory dictator and a political steppingstone for its sole director,” wrote Dennis Shaul, who now heads a financial-services trade association.

Some lawmakers are responding. Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas) and Rep. John Ratcliffe (R-Texas) introduced a bill in February to abolish the bureau. Despite this being the official position of the GOP, it has only seven cosponsors in the Senate and 30 in the House.

A measure with more traction is the Financial Choice Act, a more comprehensive suite of Dodd-Frank reforms. It includes a major overhaul of the CFPB, restricting its powers, giving the executive branch more control over its director, drawing its budget from Congress, and renaming it the Consumer Law Enforcement Agency. The bill passed the House in June with no Democratic support. Its fate rests with the Senate, where sensible, conservative reforms too often go to die.

Across Washington, regulatory burdens are being reduced. Republicans have a rare and welcome chance to undo the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau—and prove Ronald Reagan wrong. ♦



# King of the Jungle

*The Mayan empire of archaeologist Richard Hansen*

BY CHARLOTTE ALLEN

*Rupert, Idaho*

**R**ichard D. Hansen is the director of what is probably the largest archaeological excavation in the world, the Mirador Basin Project, some 51 ancient Mayan cities connected by raised causeways along an 840-square-mile elevated trough in the middle of the dense and swampy rainforest of the northern Guatemalan lowlands. Hansen's annual excavation budget for the project is in the range of \$2.5 million, dwarfing the \$200,000 to \$500,000 a year that most archaeologists are able to scrape together from grants for their more modest digs. The ancient Mayan structures in the Mirador Basin, uncovered by Hansen's team of archaeologists, conservators, soil scientists, students from 66 different research universities and institutions, and up to 400 local Guatemalan workmen, are startlingly massive in both height and volume. When the jungle vegetation was peeled back, the ruins of the El Mirador complex were revealed to be four times the size of the sculpture-studded complex at Tikal, a once-powerful Mayan city-state and a popular Guatemalan tourist destination that is the crown jewel of Mayan architecture. At 230 feet, the highest of Tikal's soaring zigurat-shaped temple-pyramids was once considered the tallest Mayan structure. But the temple-pyramid of La Danta unearthed by Hansen at El Mirador and similarly ornamented with intricate carvings is a shade higher, at 236 feet.

The main reason the 300,000-odd tourists who visit Tikal every year don't flock in equal numbers to the Mirador Basin to look at its vastly larger wonders is because they can't, unless they are intrepid or rich. El Mirador is either a five-day humidity-and-snake-plagued hike from the nearest road-accessible town, Carmelita, or a round-trip helicopter ride from Flores, the nearest town with an airport, that can run into the thousands of dollars. El Mirador's roadless condition reflects a deliberate choice on Hansen's part, with the cooperation of the Guatemalan government. "Doing anything else would facilitate the evils that are there" in chronically poor and crime-afflicted Guatemala, Hansen told me. "The looting, the poaching, the narco-trafficking, the prostitution, and all of the ills that come along with all of that."

(Hansen has for years pitched the construction of a small train that would cut the non-helicopter travel time to eight hours and provide some tourist business to Carmelita and other villages, so far to no avail.) But those who have managed to visit La Danta and its surrounding ruins have come away overwhelmed at the huge monument-studded area that might have supported as many as one million people during its heyday. El Mirador alone likely had a population of 200,000, in contrast to the mere 90,000 who lived in and built Tikal, Hansen believes. "It was boggling to think we were standing on the labor of thousands of people from antiquity, and to imagine their vanished metropolis," *Smithsonian* magazine writer Chip Brown, who made the helicopter trip to the basin with Hansen, wrote in 2011.

But the sheer size of the Mirador Basin settlement isn't what made Richard Hansen famous. It was the discovery he made at El Mirador, as a lowly graduate student in 1979, that utterly changed the way scholars of pre-Columbian American history looked at Mayan history. Before then, it was believed that nearly all the great monuments of Mayan civilization—the pyramids, the brilliantly painted murals, the elaborate stone carvings—dated no earlier than what is known as the "classic" Mayan period that ran from about 250 to 900 A.D., roughly corresponding to the early Middle Ages in Europe. After 900, that civilization appears to have collapsed, and the inhabitants of its impressive cities abandoned them precipitously. The Mayan ruins at Tikal, as well as those at such well-traveled tourist destinations as Uxmal and Palenque in southern Mexico and Copán in Honduras, all represent glorious architectural phases of the classic Mayan period. There was something of a resurgence of grand Mayan architecture in what is known as the "post-classic" period that lasted until the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors in the 1520s—although the post-classic style, best represented by the pyramid complex of Chichén Itzá on Mexico's Yucatán peninsula that flourished until around 1250, was heavily influenced by the cultures of the Toltec and Aztec Indians of central Mexico, who might even have invaded and subjected the Mayan territories.

Archaeologists were long aware that there had also been a "preclassic" Mayan period dating from roughly 1,800 B.C. to 150 A.D., but it was believed to have consisted of primitive village-settlements of hunters and maize-farmers practicing slash-and-burn agriculture in the densely forested

*Charlotte Allen is a frequent contributor to THE WEEKLY STANDARD.*



*Hansen explaining details of an El Mirador frieze from around 300 B.C.*

Mayan lowlands. Their art? Some polished-looking but unadorned pottery, usually red but sometimes cream-colored or black, which contrasted starkly with the richly figurative creamware of the classic period. The most sophisticated pre-Columbian civilization of that early period was believed to have been that of the Olmec of southern Mexico (1,400-400 B.C.), famous for colossal stone sculptures of human heads and other carvings and ceramics. The best that the preclassic Maya could do, it was thought, was to erect a modest eight-meter pyramid at Uuxactún, a settlement about 12 miles north of Tikal. That low-slung structure was regarded as a precursor to the classic-era Mayan structures—much in the way that the small step-pyramids of Saqqara, Dashur, and elsewhere in pharaonic Egypt preceded the Great Pyramid of Cheops.

The gigantic El Mirador complex had first been discovered in 1926, and it was assumed that owing to its sheer size and elaborate layout, it represented yet another classic-period city like Tikal, only in worse condition. But while excavating a chamber in the bottom level of a structure at El Mirador known as the Jaguar Paw Temple (the jungle cat had totemic significance for the Maya), the 26-year-old Hansen came across fragments of polished-red pottery, undisturbed for centuries, that could only be preclassic in origin. “That ceramic was only produced in the Mirador Basin, and I was the first one who identified that,” he says.

It was a startling moment of revisionism: It meant that the entire El Mirador agglomeration dated at least five centuries earlier than anyone had thought, to a period that began before the time of Christ, and that the preclassic Maya, rather than being primitive forerunners of a more elaborate classic civilization, had built far bigger and produced an even more complex and powerful political and social organization than their medieval successors—until they, like their successors, precipitously abandoned their massive settlements during the middle of the second century. The preclassic Maya were also just as sophisticated artistically and culturally as their successors: Some of the stucco panels in a frieze at El Mirador depict the “Hero Twins,” the protagonists of the Mayan creation myth that would be written down nearly 1,500 years later in the *Popol Vuh*, one of the few surviving Mayan narrative texts. And as Hansen and other archaeologists later discovered, instead of practicing relatively inefficient slash-and-burn agriculture, which requires farmers to move their fields every few years as the soil becomes exhausted, the Maya of the Mirador Basin constructed terraces into which they hauled nutrient-rich mud from nearby swamps, enabling the cultivation of dense harvests of corn, squash, chili peppers, and beans that could feed tens of thousands of people on limited acreage. Hansen’s theories about the cultural refinement of preclassic Mayan civilization have



been borne out by later archaeological findings. In 2001, for example, William Saturno, now an archaeology professor at Boston University, uncovered a set of brilliantly colored frescoes at the preclassic site of San Bartolo not far from Tikal that also recounted events narrated in the *Popol Vuh*. “In 1978, the preclassic Maya were thought to be hunters and gatherers,” Hansen says. “They had a pyramid 8 meters high at Uaxactún. Now we know they had pyramids 72 meters high.”

## THE ACADEMIC ENTREPRENEUR

**A**rchaeological digs are usually a summertime affair—at El Mirador the excavations run from May to September in order to accommodate the school year for professors and students—so I met with Hansen in the off-season, late February, when he was temporarily back in Rupert, Idaho, where he is the second-most famous native son after television personality Lou Dobbs (who was born in Rupert but no longer lives there).

What Idaho is most famous for, though, are the potatoes, all of which are grown in the Snake River valley, a crescent-shaped rolling plain that tracks the Snake River for 400 miles across the southern portion of the state from the Oregon border nearly to Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming. Rupert is a town of 5,500 near the center of the valley, a few miles north of the Snake, and surrounded by vast potato and sugar-beet fields.

Hansen was flying in from Los Angeles after a whirlwind Southern California fundraising expedition among wealthy donors with Mayan interests who, along with corporations, family foundations, and organizations such as the National Geographic Society, finance his Mirador Basin Project-focused nonprofit, the Foundation for Anthropological Research & Environmental Studies (FARES). One of the FARES board members is actor and director Mel Gibson; Hansen was the archaeological consultant for Gibson’s 2006 Mayan movie, *Apocalypto*.

Despite his impressive credentials, his extraordinary discoveries, and a list of scholarly publications with team members that runs to more than 200, Hansen is essentially an academic entrepreneur, a solo traveler without a

tenured professorship or salary who over the years has had to pay for some of his excavations out of his own pocket and even go into debt. Shortly after that weekend in Rupert, he would be back in Guatemala entertaining a top NASA official and ferrying around some VIPs from the National Geographic Society—more fundraising, that is.

The weekend in Rupert itself had a whirlwind quality. Hansen, who holds a doctorate in anthropology from the University of California, Los Angeles, still has a loose connection to academia: He is an adjunct professor at the

University of Utah, a gig that doesn’t pay much but allows him to sit on doctoral-dissertation committees. He had two of the graduate students he has been helping to supervise in tow when we met at the Salt Lake City airport for our flight to Twin Falls, Idaho, the airport closest to Rupert: Carlos Morales, a Guatemalan-born doctoral student at the Sorbonne in Paris who is helping Hansen construct digital maps of the Mirador Basin Project, and Pilar Vásquez, writing a dissertation on Mayan iconography at Complutense University of Madrid. The four of us would be joined in Rupert by Hansen’s California-born wife Jody, a self-taught artist who meticulously illustrates his

archaeological finds (the two met on a dig in Israel that Richard Hansen was supervising between college and grad school), and their 15-year-old son, Weston, the youngest of seven Hansen children, including an adopted Guatemalan daughter.

Roaring along Interstate 84 and the back roads of the Snake River valley in his GMC Sierra, the ebullient Hansen showed off the twin falls of Twin Falls, which were nearly paralyzed by winter ice, and the mom-and-pop truck stops and hamburger stands that dotted a rural roadscape too sparsely populated to support many chain fast-food outlets (“That’s what makes America work,” Hansen, a Rupert booster, boasted about the family-owned businesses.) We rolled past a beet-sugar processing plant, its steam swirling high and snow-white in the frigid air, a Chobani yogurt factory, a snow-blanketed golf course (Hansen: “We now have moose coming up—they chase the golfers—it could be a whole new sport!”), the handsome



period downtown of Rupert, the Minidoka County High School currently attended by Weston (three other Hansen children were valedictorians), and a now-shuttered potato-processing plant that once supplied nearly all the frozen French fries served worldwide by McDonald's.

Hansen comes from a potato-farming family himself; he sold off his agricultural interests only in 2003, to his two younger brothers who continue to run the business. One of the stops on our tour was Mart Produce, a state-of-the-art potato storage, sorting, and packing plant that Hansen's brothers and several other potato-farming families own and operate. It was an impressive sight: empty and still on a Saturday morning except for hundreds of thousands of boxed or bagged Idaho potatoes of every conceivable size (some spuds weighing up to three pounds are too big for baking but perfect for commercial French fries) awaiting shipping. At the end of our visit Hansen pushed one of the 10-pound bags of smaller russets bearing a Kroger's logo into my hands to cart back to Washington in my suitcase, and—I admit it—I violated the unwritten rule of journalism that you don't accept anything more valuable than a cup of coffee from the people you're writing about. (I baked and sautéed the potatoes after I returned, and they were delicious.)

The Hansens live in a compound dotted with fir trees on the rural outskirts of Rupert: a two-story house for the family (Weston is the only child still at home) and the "lab," as Hansen calls it, an adjacent three-story brick structure ornamented with a distinctive "cross-stitch" motif typical of classic Mayan architecture, in which the stonework on walls often imitated textiles. The lab doesn't house any Mayan artifacts (all of Hansen's findings from the Mirador Basin remain in another lab of his in Guatemala City) but functions as a warren of offices and living spaces, including a kitchen and laundry room, for Hansen's graduate-student assistants and guests. Hansen had the structure built two years ago after he moved his operating base to Rupert from Idaho State University in Pocatello, where he had been an assistant professor. When I visited, the lab was housing Vásquez and Morales along with Stanley Guenter, whose doctoral dissertation on Mayan epigraphy for Southern Methodist University Hansen had helped supervise and who has coauthored several papers with him. The biggest office, occupying the entire second floor and sporting an enormous unlit fireplace housing a collection of petrified logs, belongs to Hansen himself. Its bookshelves, occupying all four walls of the room, were crammed with every volume and periodical on Mayan civilization that had seemingly ever been written, reproductions of classic-era Mayan pottery, and binders filled with Hansen's field

notes over the past four decades (some of them stacked in "Idaho Potato" boxes from Mart Produce) and the detailed annual reports of his findings that Hansen writes in Spanish for the Guatemalan government. They also held, perhaps most tellingly, dozens of jawbones of prehistoric mammoths and mastodons and framed collections of Indian arrowheads, all found by Hansen himself when he roamed the hills and rolling farmlands of the Snake River valley as a boy. "This is what led me to become an archaeologist," he says.

The Hansens are practicing Mormons. I discovered this only when they took us on a tour of their own living



*Hansen in his lab in Rupert, Idaho*

quarters, stuffed with antique Spanish-colonial furniture and folk art picked up at secondhand stores on Guatemala City's side streets and gorgeously embroidered *huipiles*—the colorful, usually handwoven cotton blouses still worn by many Guatemalan women—that Jody Hansen collects as a hobby. Crowning the mantelpiece in the living room was a portrait of Jesus in the hyper-realistic Latter-day Saints iconographic style. Mine was a mini-version of Hansen's lightbulb recognition that he was looking at preclassic, not classic, pottery at the Jaguar Paw pyramid in 1979.

It was also quite a surprise. My husband and I had met Hansen a few months earlier on a National Geographic group tour of ancient Mayan sites in Mexico and Guatemala, including Tikal. Hansen had been the chief guide. Tall, blue-eyed, slightly portly, eternally tousle-haired, and possessed of seemingly boundless energy (he was 63 at the time), he regaled and sometimes horrified our genteel group with yarns from his nearly 40 years of excavations at El Mirador. Some of the stories were merely hair-raising—such as the time he almost stepped on a fer-de-lance, the deadly and highly aggressive pit viper that menaces



the Mesoamerican jungle lowlands—but others had a distinctly Chaucerian flavor.

The most ribald of all involved a walk after dark by Hansen through the dig's tent-camp, when he noticed a crowd of men sitting dead-silent and transfixed staring at the wall of one of the tents. It seemed that a student-intern from an Ivy League university had taken up with one of the local workmen, and she liked to illuminate their nightly trysts with romantic candlelight, inadvertently creating an enthralling shadow play on the tent canvas for the ever-increasing crowd outside. "Her favorite position was on top!" Hansen recounted merrily, as the faces of some in our group paled. (He had advised the young woman the next morning that liaisons with workmen in this female-scarce environment could provoke jealous violence; mortified, she headed home the next day.) Other Hansen stories involved the archaeology professor who fell into the camp latrine after a floorboard broke and the young woman who slipped and slid out of a camp shower down a muddy hill "buck-naked," as Hansen put it. Since my main previous experience with Mormons had consisted of following clean-cut and buttoned-down Mitt Romney's GOP presidential campaign in 2012, I had taken Hansen for yet another profane and thoroughly secular academic, although of an unusually extroverted variety. What little religion was discussed on that tour mostly dealt with Mayan gods.

Even during the weekend I spent at his compound in Rupert, Hansen was not without a tale or two that might make a nun blush—such as his yarn about working with Gibson on *Apocalypto* in 2004, just as Gibson was coming off his pious giga-hit, *The Passion of the Christ*: "I was at a restaurant in Santa Monica, and one of the waitresses comes up and plops out her breast and gives him a Sharpie to sign it," Hansen relates, laughing uproariously. And Gibson, *Passion of the Christ* or no *Passion of the Christ*, gamely signed, Hansen says.

When I asked Hansen about his faith—which had never arisen in any of the numerous press accounts I had read about him, he became indignant: "It's irrelevant!" he nearly shouted. He says that he hasn't deliberately concealed his religious affiliation in interviews, merely that he's "never asked about it."

## THE MORMON CONNECTION

**Y**et it turns out that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints provides a key to Hansen's presence and his spectacular achievements at El Mirador. The ancient Maya, seven million of whose descendants still live in scattered villages in southern Mexico and Central America, created the most complex and fascinating civilization that existed in the Americas before the arrival

of Columbus. There are thousands of Mayan sites in Mesoamerica, and new archaeological discoveries seem to emerge every couple of weeks. The Maya, alone of all pre-Columbian New World cultures, invented an extremely economical—because largely phonetic—system of writing that allowed them to record events on the carved friezes that adorned their structures. A few other groups—the Aztec and Mixtec peoples of central Mexico, for example—also had writing, but it was of a clumsier, quasi-pictographic variety that enabled them to mark down the names of people and places but little else. The Inca of South America, for all their impressive construction exploits such as Machu Picchu and their complex political and economic organization, never developed writing at all. The Maya also invented a positional numerical system somewhat analogous to the West's Arabic system (although based on sets of 20 instead of 10) that enabled them to express and calculate extremely large numbers in relatively small spaces. Mayan arithmetic was fundamental to the Mayan calendar, an interlocking series of lunar and solar cycles that could extend as long as 63 million years (the Maya were avid astronomers).

Mayan pictorial art—sculpture, carvings, painted murals, ceramics, and, starting in the classic period, illustrated fan-like bark-cloth books called codices—combined exquisite aesthetic sensibilities (harmonious composition and detailed attention to birds, animals, flowers, ornaments, and textiles) and even wit, with a fascination with pain, bloodletting, cruelty, and the degradation of one's enemies, who were typically depicted bound and kneeling in postures of abjection at the feet of their victorious foes. Religious ceremonies, at least for the Mayan elite, looked gruesome as depicted in the art: men piercing their penises with stingray spines and royal women running threads through their punctured tongues. The participants in those ceremonies dripped their shed blood onto paper, which they burned as an offering to the gods. The classic Maya, like other cultures in pre-Columbian America, practiced human sacrifice via the extraction of the living victim's heart—although it seems that, unlike the Aztecs with their mass sacrifices of captives, they limited the practice to criminal executions of individuals.

Yet because so many Mayan sites had been abandoned and camouflaged by tropical vegetation long before or shortly after the Spanish arrived, very little was actually known about ancient Mayan civilization until the middle of the 20th century. The overgrown temples and palaces that remained barely visible seemed to have no connection to the local peasant culture, which regarded them, as the Yale Maya scholar Michael Coe wrote, as "the haunted abodes of ancestors and mythic beings." The few Europeans and North Americans who visited the splendid ruins during the early 19th century believed they must have been constructed

by culturally advanced outsiders: Tartars, Welshmen, survivors from the lost continent of Atlantis. Only in the 1840s did an adventurous American diplomat, John Lloyd Stephens, recognize that the structures had been built by the very people whose offspring still lived there.

Archaeological excavations didn't begin in earnest until the 1920s, and it wasn't until the 1950s, with the advent of radiocarbon-dating, that accurate dates could be assigned to the layers of human settlement and the artifacts they contained. And it wasn't until the 1950s that scholars finally deciphered most of the classic and post-classic Mayan scripts and were thus able to read the stone glyphs. A 16th-century Spanish bishop in Yucatán, Diego de Landa, had recorded a Mayan "alphabet" that eventually provided the key to the glyphs, but owing to idiosyncratic transcriptions by de Landa's Mayan scribe, it took three centuries for de Landa's work itself to be decoded. Furthermore, to this day neither Hansen nor anyone else can read the preclassic glyphs at El Mirador and elsewhere; those early Maya spoke and wrote a different—and as yet unknown—language from that of their classic-era successors.

Among those most fascinated by the mysteries that swirled around Mayan monuments during the 19th century were Mormons. The Book of Mormon, believed by members of the LDS church to have been translated into English from gold plates handed by an angel during the 1820s to the church's founder, Joseph Smith, relates that a group of Israelites fled the city of Jerusalem after it was conquered by the Babylonians in 597 B.C. They ended up in the Americas, where they built huge cities, warred with one another, and constructed a civilization that lasted through the fourth century A.D. As the existence of large ancient Mayan cities became gradually known, thanks to the travel books of Stephens, gorgeously illustrated by the artist Frederick Catherwood, who had accompanied Stephens on his Mesoamerican journeys, many Mormons came to believe—as many still do today—that the magnificent complexes were the handiwork of those wandering Israelites.

Some Mormon amateurs set off to explore Mexico and the Guatemalan lowlands in an effort to find artifacts or bits of writings that might confirm an Israelite presence there. One was Thomas Stuart Ferguson (1915-1983), a Mormon lawyer from California who made numerous trips with his shovel to Mayan lands during the late 1940s. He came up empty-handed (it proved impossible to find any traces of the chariots and iron implements that the Israelites were said to have used, since the New World Indians had only stone blades and used the wheel only in children's

toys), and he was reported to have lost his faith during his last years. But in 1952, with the financial backing of the Mormon hotelier J. W. Marriott and, later, the Church of Latter-day Saints itself, Ferguson set up the New World Archaeological Foundation. He had two cofounders, Gordon Willey (1913-2002), a towering figure in Mayan stud-



*One of Frederick Catherwood's Mesoamerican depictions*

ies at Harvard who was regarded as the dean of New World archaeology, and Alfred V. Kidder (1885-1963) of the Carnegie Institution. Ferguson hoped to help prove the Book of Mormon's literal historicity, but Willey and Kidder simply wanted to do archaeology, and they gave the foundation solid scientific respectability. In 1961 the foundation became affiliated with Brigham Young University—but the LDS-owned school's first action was to get rid of Ferguson as the foundation's head. Many of Brigham Young's archaeology professors were devout churchmen, but they hoped to build an archaeology program that would steer clear of



doctrinal preoccupations—perhaps not unlike Hansen’s vehemence when I asked him about his religion. Only one trace of Ferguson’s legacy remains at the foundation: a focus on the Mayan preclassic period, which roughly corresponds to the Israelite presence in the New World as recounted in the Book of Mormon.



*Temple IV at Tikal, long thought to be the tallest Mayan structure*

## EXCAVATING FOR FUNDING

**T**he New World Archaeological Foundation helped sponsor the dig at El Mirador where Hansen found the preclassic Mayan pottery in 1979. After graduating from Minidoka County High School, he served a two-year stint, as many young Mormon men do, as a missionary in Bolivia, where he became fluent in Spanish. He then majored in Latin American literature at Brigham Young and, after graduation and his stint in Israel, enrolled in Brigham Young’s master’s program in archaeology. His mentor was Ray T. Matheny, a professor of anthropology who only the year before, in 1978, had begun the very first excavations at the jungle-shrouded site, along with Bruce Dahlin (1941-2011), then an archaeology professor at the Catholic University of America. Hansen as a graduate student worked alongside Matheny and Dahlin at El Mirador for several years.

Then, in 1983, a single-engine Helio Courier carrying the Hansens and their eldest daughter, Micalena, age 2, crashed into the jungle a few minutes after takeoff from El Mirador. Everyone survived, including the pilot, jumping to the ground seconds before the downed plane exploded, taking with it Hansen’s only two copies of his master’s

thesis, which he had to rewrite from scratch in a hurry in order to receive his degree in 1984. The plane (whose burnt wreckage Hansen says can still be seen in the tree where it came to rest) had belonged to Matheny, who had been part of a World War II bomber crew, and the crash marked the end of Matheny’s career in the Mirador Basin. The Guatemalan government pulled his excavation permits and shut down the airstrip; this had been the second plane Matheny lost, the Hansens told me. “They didn’t want to work with Matheny anymore,” says Jody Hansen. “They wanted to work with Richard.” That was where Hansen’s youthful service as a missionary in Bolivia paid off. Matheny couldn’t speak Spanish very well, Hansen says, but Hansen had become as fluent as a local. Furthermore, “I learned how to interact with Latin Americans. I could see how they perceived each other, and I was able to react.” (Matheny, who went on to supervise other excavations elsewhere and is now an emeritus professor at Brigham Young, did not respond to requests for an interview.)

The next year Hansen applied for a grant from the Guatemalan government to excavate at Nakbe, an even older preclassic Mayan site about eight miles south of El Mirador—and the officials broadened the grant essentially to include most of the Mirador Basin. Hansen had understood how to get an official permit: “You ask about their families, you crack a few jokes.” His study of Latin American literature had paid off, too; in 1980 he had dazzled then-Guatemalan president Fernando Lucas García over lunch with knowledgeable disquisitions about Jorge Luis Borges and Pablo Neruda.

“I learned a lot from [Ray Matheny], I learned an awful lot from him,” Hansen says. “I learned a lot from his mistakes, the mistakes made as project directors, and I improved on them.” He also candidly admits that he has made “mistakes all the time” of his own. “Last year alone I made a mistake running two big projects at the same time simultaneously. It ran me ragged. I ran a big project at Nakbe and a big project at Mirador at the same time. At Nakbe I needed a conservator to work that day. So I had to send a runner for five hours to [El Mirador] to notify him, and he had to stop what he was doing over there and [take] another five hours to get back. So I lost 10 hours of crucial time when we could have resolved the problem in 30 seconds. I hate that inefficiency.”

By 1984 Hansen owned much of the Mirador Basin in a sense—but his life, with an expanding family to support while trying to complete his doctoral work at UCLA, wasn’t easy. Archaeology—at least for those who oversee excavations—is one of the most expensive academic endeavors and one of the most difficult to find funding for. I talked to two archaeologists lucky enough to have tenured professorships that at least cover their living expenses and

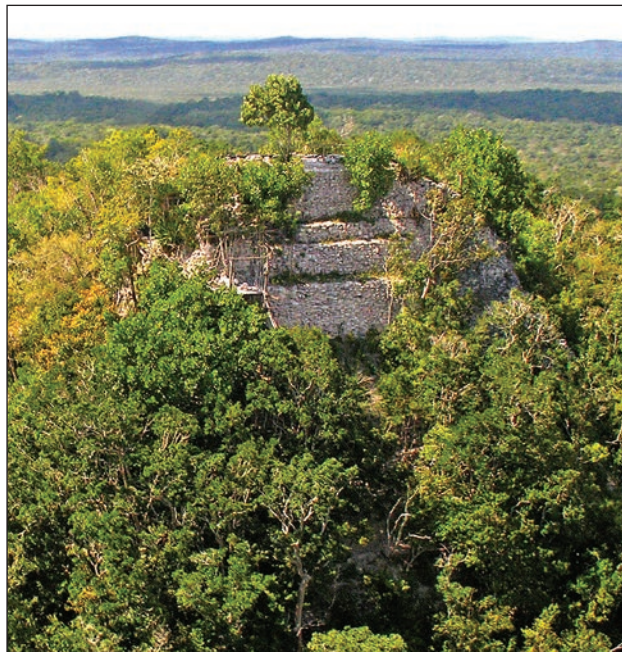
provide some technical backup—and they both described their academic lives as scrambles to raise enough money to feed and make payroll for the dozens to hundreds of people, including highly specialized scientists, who do the hard and meticulous work of excavating sites (Hansen's payroll includes, besides soil and preservation experts, two physicians to tend to injuries in the remote basin). Only at, say, hugely endowed Harvard, whose Mayan program, reflecting Gordon Willey's legacy, is the nation's flagship, can archaeology professors rest easy about funding.

"Most people have no knowledge of what archaeologists do," says Jodi Magness, president of the Archaeological Institute of America, pointing out that the standard image of an archaeologist is a plane-hopping Indiana Jones-style swashbuckler into whose hands antiquities fall as if by magic. "They think we dig all the time," says Magness. A professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Magness leads an excavation team at Huqoq in Galilee that has unearthed a Roman-era synagogue adorned by spectacular floor mosaics depicting biblical scenes. But Magness and her crew can afford to dig for only one summer month out of the year, and she spends the other 11 months hunting down the \$200,000 it costs just to fund that single month. "We get student fees from a field school we operate, we get random grants, and we have private donors," says Magness.

Federal money for archaeology is nearly nonexistent. The National Science Foundation's annual budget is \$7.5 billion, but it allocates only from \$500,000 to \$1 million to archaeological excavations. Some 100 to 200 scholars file grant applications for those limited dollars, and "only 15 percent of the proposals are ever funded," says Vernon Scarborough, a professor of anthropology and archaeology at the University of Cincinnati who has spent much of his career at a Mayan site, Cerros, in northern Belize, where he became an expert on Mayan water conservation (the ancient Maya were adept at constructing cisterns, irrigation ditches, and canals in order to grow crops and support large populations in a landscape that features a long dry season). "It's time-consuming to produce those grant applications," Scarborough says. "And then you have to get them past a panel of archaeologists to approve them." Scarborough and Magness agreed that the general lack of establishment funding for archaeological projects has made archaeology one of the few academic fields where a gifted solo practitioner—such as Richard Hansen—can gain the same scholarly respectability as an Ivy League professor who has carefully climbed the rungs of the tenure ladder.

That may be all well and good, but during the mid-1980s it seemed less so to Hansen as he struggled to put together a crew to meet the financial and logistical challenges of excavating the Mirador Basin, whose Mayan structures were

already fragile and crumbling owing to their great age and the 1,800-odd years' worth of dense jungle undergrowth that had weakened their walls and foundations. He placed a newspaper ad begging for volunteers to excavate a "lost" Mayan city that drew hundreds of college students, hippies, and other adventurous or Maya-moonstruck young people



*La Danta at Mirador, a shade higher than the temple at Tikal*

willing to dig for next to nothing. In the roadless Mirador Basin nearly all supplies and provisions had to be trekked to the site on the backs of mules (as they still do), and the mules themselves had to be fed. Hansen figured out that he could cut freight and feed costs by having the mules graze on the leaves of the ramón, or breadnut, tree ubiquitous in the Central American rainforest. That was where his farming background with its focus on thrift and efficiency paid off. "I can do with a million dollars what most projects can do with two million dollars," he says.

He spent those years living on one of the family properties farming by day ("I could spend quality time with my kids and help Jody out"), writing up his archaeological research by night, and plowing whatever he earned from the potatoes into the Mirador Basin. Still, by 1986 he was ready to throw in the towel on archaeology: "It was starting to look like an expensive hobby." But then, suddenly, the rewards of his astonishing discoveries at El Mirador started flowing in. He was named a National Graduate Fellow, a Jacob Javits Fellow, a UCLA Distinguished Scholar, UCLA's Outstanding Graduate Student of the year, and a Fulbright Scholar in Guatemala. Hundreds of thousands of dollars in research money followed, and Hansen was basically free to pursue his entrepreneurial career in the



Mirador Basin—and make a living at it. “If I was full-time [in a university tenure-track position], I couldn’t do what I’m essentially doing,” Hansen says. “I’d have to be teaching. I do teach, . . . but if I had a full-time professorship, they’d have my fanny at a desk down there and attending faculty meetings. You’ve got classes. You can run small projects, but not a project on this scale. This is the largest project in the history of Guatemala.”

### ‘AS HUMAN AS NAPOLEON AND HITLER’

**H**ansen’s freedom from the strictures of academia also helped him become one of the very first archaeologists to exploit a brand-new technology that has been to Mayanists of the second decade of the 21st century what carbon-dating was to the Mayanists of the 1950s: light detection and ranging, or LiDAR. The technology—using airborne lasers to “map” the topography of a given area digitally, revealing the natural peaks and valleys, as well as manmade structures, beneath the dense jungle canopies that otherwise mask them—had been used for decades by NASA to create digital maps of planet surfaces. In 2007 archaeologist Arlen Chase, now at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, who had been excavating a huge classic Mayan site at Caracol in Belize since 1985, figured out that LiDAR could be used to transform what had been a snail-slow process of mapping sites such as his own, which was bigger than Tikal. The technique until then had consisted essentially of using machetes to clear the overgrowth and doing sample pit-digs. “By 2003 I was tired of mapping, and we’d done only 23 square kilometers,” Chase says. In 2007 he applied for a grant from NASA for LiDAR flyovers at Caracol that during one single year in 2009 added 200 more square kilometers to the Caracol map at a resolution of one meter. “It blew us away. I couldn’t believe what we were able to see,” Chase says. He rushed his findings to the public: an article in *Archaeology* magazine, a front-page *New York Times* story, a National Geographic Society video, and, in 2011, a full-fledged scholarly paper in the *Journal of Archaeological Science*. Hansen was among the first archaeologists to take advantage of the “paradigm shift,” as Chase called it, promptly contacting Chase and then importing LiDAR to the Mirador Basin. The work I saw Carlos Morales doing in Rupert consisted of making maps from the raw LiDAR data.

Still, there is an academic establishment in Mayan studies, and it is an establishment with whose reigning ideology Hansen has often found himself at cross-purposes. Like the 19th-century Mormons who believed that they could find traces of an Israelite civilization in Mesoamerica, many progressive North American secular intellectuals of the 20th century constructed their own mythology about the people who built the temples and palaces. Since the jungle had

overgrown and masked the populous human settlements that maintained Mayan economic and political life, it was assumed that the ancient Mayan complexes consisted of sparsely populated peasant villages ruled by high-minded priest-kings who inhabited the temples and spent their days speculating about astronomy and working out the Mayan calendar. Individual carvings might depict warfare, bloodshed, and supplicating captives, but they were assumed to record purely mythological events. “In the liberal mentality of our liberal colleagues, the Maya were star-gazing, poetry-reciting, peace-loving people in harmony with their forests,” Hansen says. “It’s a crock. They were as human as the Romans, as human as the Greeks. They were as human as Napoleon and Hitler. They had all the virtues and vices of contemporary society.”

When scholars in the 1950s learned how to read the glyphs, they discovered that the Maya’s chief artistic obsession had actually been recording the history of their own rulers; most of those supposed gods and goddesses painted and carved in clay, stucco, and stone turned out to be historic kings and queens celebrating their victories at war and the defeat and death of their enemies. We now know the names of entire dynasties of Mayan rulers, even some of the dynasties of the preclassic period, owing to decorated pottery made during classic times. During the classic period, the Guatemalan lowlands were a hive of warring city-states jostling for dominion and tribute-collection, with the kingpins Tikal and its powerful rival Calakmul, about 60 miles north and on the other side of today’s Mexican border, engaged in an incessant series of bloody conflicts between 500 and 838 A.D. On the National Geographic tour in which my husband and I participated, Hansen delighted in pointing out the warrior bands crushing their foes and the kings executing their manacled rivals that were a routine pictorial theme of Mayan artwork.

Mayan society was rigidly hierarchical—the default condition of human societies, Hansen believes. Although the peasant farmers occupying the bottom rung of the socioeconomic ladder didn’t starve and seemed to live in relative security, they were the ones that had to do the literal heavy lifting of building the imposing structures that their rulers demanded: hauling thousand-pound limestone blocks from quarries in a culture that lacked draft or any other kind of domestic animals (Hansen estimates that it took a dozen men to carry each block, and that building the 45-acre La Danta pyramid required some 15 million man-days of labor). Toil on the pyramids wasn’t exactly slave labor, but it was definitely a form of taxation that only the elite class could escape—and that class paid the price in its own way, should its warriors be captured by their enemies in the ceaseless battles. Rigidly authoritarian, ancient Mayan society was glued into cohesion by shared religious ideology, the

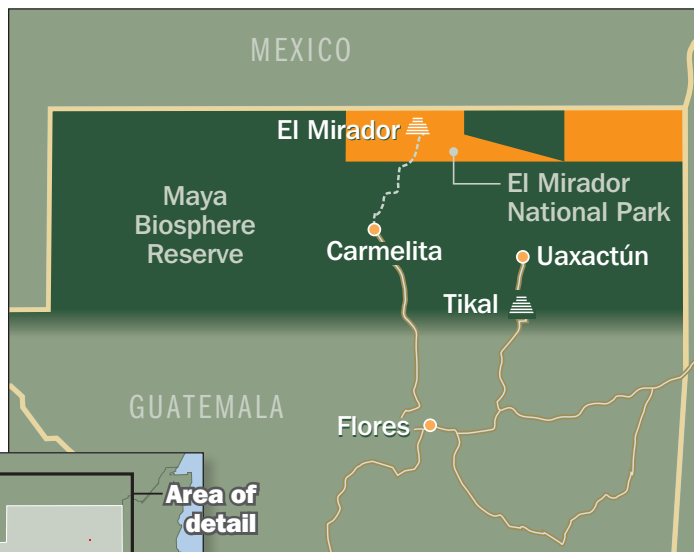
strength of the king's personality, and naked force, Hansen believes—and it's a belief that still rattles many sentimental academics who think that indigenous peoples possessed a superior political wisdom to that of the colonizing West: elders sitting around the campfire governing by consensus. "Everybody goes for these egalitarian models," Hansen says. "Everybody's equal, we're all going to live together the same, we're all equal. That's a crock. That's baloney. And the reason is there's no such thing as an egalitarian society. Somebody can always run faster, somebody's always the better shot, somebody's the better fisherman, they're the ones that are going to excel. When you see changes in society, they're never done by society. They're done by charismatic individuals—how charismatic and how powerful the ruler had to be to make that happen."

### WHAT HAPPENED?

No controversy over the ancient Maya is so fraught with academic disputation as the sudden abandonment of preclassic Mayan settlements during the mid-second century and of classic Mayan settlements sometime at the end of the ninth century. The word "collapse" is frequently used by archaeologists to describe those apparent catastrophes, with the word's implications of a demographic free-fall, as it seems to have become impossible for the settlements to feed the large populations that they had once supported, with mass starvation and die-offs the likely ensuing consequences. Hansen has an explanation for the collapse of the preclassic cultures of the Mirador Basin, and it is a politically incorrect one, if amply documented by the soil scientists who have been part of Hansen's team: that the pre-classic Maya, far from living in harmony with the surrounding rainforest, exploited it brutally. They were obsessed with adorning their temples and other structures with thick layers of plaster—"conspicuous consumption," Hansen calls it. To make the lime for the plaster, they had to burn limestone from their quarries, which in turn necessitated chopping down trees by the ton to stoke the fires. The massive deforestation led to massive erosion during the annual rainy season, which in turn dumped tons of sterile mud into the swamps whose nutrients had supplied the terraced fields that once fed hundreds of thousands of people. Hansen believes that a similar deforestation process ultimately killed off the classic Mayan civilization some 800 years later, although the evidence isn't quite so clear; other archaeologists have posited as alternative explanations a deadly series of droughts, a failure of the Mayan kingship system, and the

economic, political, and social strain of the endless warfare among the classic-era city-states.

But lately, it seems to have become fashionable in academia to argue that there was no such thing as a Mayan "collapse"—on the ground that any theory that the ancient Maya might have engineered their own culture's self-destruction is demeaning to the millions of present-day



Maya Indians. Public intellectual Jared Diamond, in his best-selling 2005 book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, used the abandonment of classic Mayan settlements in 900 A.D. as an object lesson for 21st-century politicians inclined to ignore global

warming or environmental degradation—and this rankled a new generation of revisionists. In a 2009 paper "Bellicose Rulers and Climatological Peril?: Retrofitting Twenty-First Century Woes on Eighth-Century Maya Society," Patricia A. McAnany, an anthropology professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Tomás Negrón of Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History pooh-pooh the ideas that Mayan kings had been war-prone and Mayan farmers had failed to practice conservation. McAnany and Negrón contend that instead of dying off, the inhabitants of the classic Mayan centers simply packed up and moved away from their landlocked interior cities to the coastlines in order to pursue trading and other mercantile activities, demonstrating a cultural "resilience" that presents a more flattering image to today's Maya. "Certainly, total systemic failure makes for a more dramatic plot-line, but with a descendent community of several million people, it is hardly an accurate assessment and is even denigrating to descendants who read that their ancestors supposedly 'died out' by the tenth century and that they are not related





Near the summit of La Danta at El Mirador—one of the largest pyramids on earth

to the Classic Maya who built the cities—now in ruins—on which a mega-million-dollar tourist industry has been built,” McAnany and Negrón write.

Such solicitude for the feelings of the present-day Maya is in keeping with a seismic postmodernist shift in the way many anthropologists (archaeology is a subfield of anthropology) regard themselves: as advocates for the groups of people they study rather than simply as scholars with claims to objectivity. Hansen’s former grad student Stanley Guenter told me that he had been at an academic conference at which an attendee stood up and said, “I am a descendant of the Aztecs, and all those stories about human sacrifice were all lies of the Spanish.”

Mel Gibson’s *Apocalypto*, with its plot line involving a Mayan rainforest dweller who narrowly escapes having his heart ripped out in an orgy of human sacrifice just before the first Spaniards arrive in the early 16th century, became a lightning rod for revisionist fury among academic Mayanists. Gibson had brought in Hansen as a consultant after seeing a 2003 National Geographic documentary, *Dawn of the Maya*, in which Hansen had shown off his excavations at El Mirador. Adding to the fury: A few months before the film’s release in December 2006, Gibson had erupted in an anti-Semitic tirade to a police officer arresting him for drunk

driving, lending credence to critics’ allegations that *The Passion of the Christ* had been tinged with anti-Semitism. No sooner did *Apocalypto* arrive at the movie theaters than complaints poured in from enraged professors at Harvard and elsewhere charging that the movie was loaded with historical inaccuracies, had turned the ancient Maya into “slashers,” and was “offensive” to present-day Maya.

The American Anthropological Society devoted an entire session of its 2007 meeting to critiquing *Apocalypto* as “a big budget manipulation of cultural history,” in the words of one attendee. Some of the academics obviously “hadn’t even seen the movie” before they talked to the press, Hansen says. One professor, for example, assuming that *Apocalypto*’s theme was the ninth-century collapse of classic Mayan civilization, told a reporter that “the last Mayan city was abandoned” 100 years before the Spanish conquests. In fact, Hansen says, he had worked carefully to help Gibson re-create the Aztec-influenced *postclassic* Mayan civilization that was still very much alive on the coast of southern Mexico when the first conquistadors made landfall there. Hansen had used postclassic Mayan sites such as Chichén Itzá, where racks of human skulls and images of mass human sacrifice reflected bloodthirsty Aztec-inspired practices, as models for the fictional city that Gibson created for the

BRENT WINEBRENNER / GETTY

movie. (The film does contain one glaring anachronism from which Hansen says he had tried to dissuade Gibson: a reproduction of a vivid preclassic mural from San Bartolo showing a deer sacrificed on an altar by having its heart torn out; Gibson changed the deer image to that of a human being for maximum dramatic effect.)

The *Apocalypso* furor was an object-lesson for Hansen. No scholar wants to meet the fate of the politically incorrect Napoleon Chagnon, the longtime professor of anthropology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, whose studies of the Yanomami rainforest dwellers of Venezuela during the 1960s and 1970s made him a target of revisionist opprobrium decades later. Chagnon, despite his obvious affection for his hunter-gatherer subjects (he would occasionally dress—or undress—as a nearly naked but elaborately painted Yanomami warrior), described them as ferocious, filthy, and fighting incessantly and murderously over women. This not only undercut the myth of the noble savage; it interfered with prevailing Marxist-materialist theory that people go to war only over scarce resources or for other economic reasons. Chagnon was accused of fabricating data, fomenting violence among his subjects, projecting his own aggressive personality onto them, and even exposing them to a deadly measles outbreak in order to test a claim about their racial lack of immunity (he had actually initiated a mass vaccination campaign for the group). The American Anthropological Association never reached a consensus over whether Chagnon had done anything wrong, but he remains a controversial figure.

“We have to be careful,” Hansen says. “If we come out vociferously against [political correctness], I’ll never get a grant proposal passed, never get publications out, get poor reviews on publications, because, uh, you know, he’s one of those right-wing, gun-slinging, you know, Bible-toting, you know, pencil-neck geeks.” Indeed, Hansen may already be controversial among his fellow academics. While researching this article, I sent emails to more than a dozen archaeology professors at prestigious universities. Many either failed to reply or declined to be interviewed.

### ORDER OF THE QUETZAL

Hansen instead has made himself an advocate for the present-day Maya on the ground. The Mirador Basin Project holds literacy classes for the local Guatemalan workmen, many of whom have never seen the inside of a school, having gone to work at age 5 to help out on family farms or harvest the sap from the *chicle* or sapodilla trees that forms the basis of chewing gum. As for the local schools, he says, “we bought them 72 computers.” He pays out of his own pocket (even selling one of his farms in 1992) for year-round security guards at the site, in order to protect it from looters. And the rainforest itself is

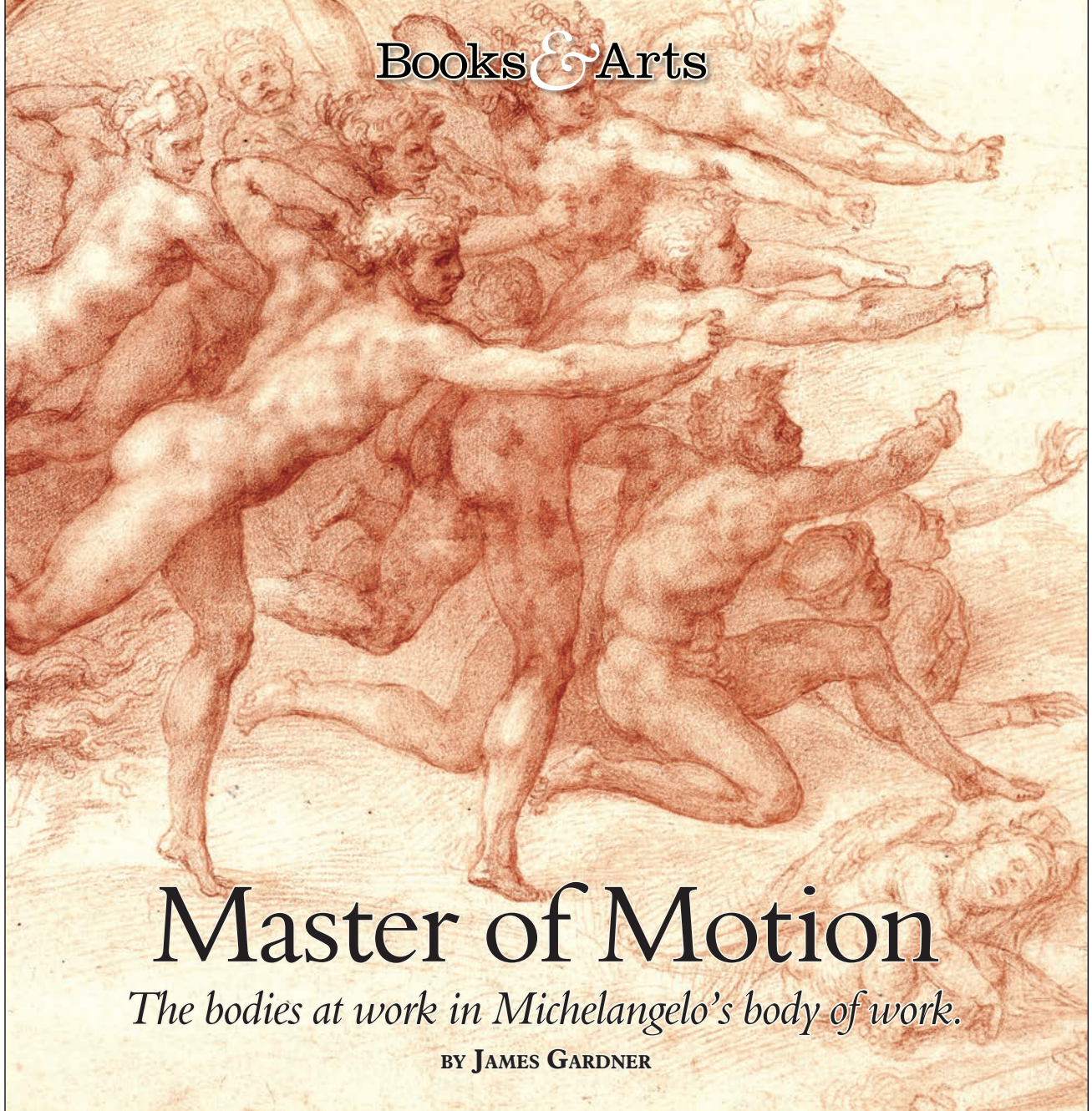
his passion. The Mirador Basin is in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, some 8,000 square miles of forest hosting plants and animals found nowhere else on earth, but half of the reserve has already been destroyed by aggressive logging. A tiny national park surrounding the El Mirador complex itself saves some of the rest, and the Mirador Basin Project recently spent a half-million dollars to purchase logging rights that protect about 55,000 more acres (“It bought the rights, but it doesn’t log”). He has campaigned for years—so far without effect—for the Guatemalan government to get logging entirely out of the basin by declaring it a roadless wilderness in perpetuity. “The loggers have to put roads in to get the logs out, and when you get the roads, you get the narcos. Then come the poachers, the looters.”

In March Richard Hansen flew back to Guatemala to receive the Order of the Quetzal, the highest honor that the Guatemalan government has to offer. Accompanying him were Jody Hansen, all seven of the Hansen children (three sons, four daughters), a son-in-law, and a baby grandson. My husband and I flew down as well, and the transformation from ice-bound Rupert to the perpetual flowery spring of Central America was startling. The Hansens had traded rugged boots and winter parkas for dressed-up suits and, in Jody Hansen’s case, high-heeled sandals. The award—the draping of Richard Hansen in a silk sash in Guatemala’s national colors of azure and white displaying an enormous medal featuring the long-tailed iridescent-green quetzal that is Guatemala’s national bird—took place inside the green-tinted volcanic-stone Palacio Nacional de Cultura in downtown Guatemala City. The ancient Guatemalan Maya built to impress—and so have their modern-day successors. The Palacio, constructed in the 1930s with prison labor, was a monument to showy extravagance: an interior brilliant with gold leaf, stained-glass windows, two-ton chandeliers, molding on every surface, including column capitals and bases, fringed-velvet valances, and the most elaborate coffered ceilings I have ever seen.

During his acceptance speech in flawless if American-accented Spanish, Hansen had tears in his eyes. He also delivered a gentle but pointed lecture, a lesson from the preclassic Maya of El Mirador for Guatemalan residents of today: that destroying the environment can destroy a civilization.

In Rupert, Hansen had said, “The wonderful thing about archaeology that no other science can do is that we can see the origins, the dynamics, and the collapse of a civilization in one window. Whereas you and I can’t see our origins that occurred in 1776. We can’t see our collapse because that’s somewhere in the future. When you look at it through the window of archaeology, you can see the whole story. You can see the things they had to do that were right, and you can see the things that took them to hell.” ♦





# Master of Motion

*The bodies at work in Michelangelo's body of work.*

BY JAMES GARDNER

**I**t would be hard to invent a more pallid or inadequate title than *Michelangelo: Divine Draftsman and Designer* for the exhibition that has just opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Divinity, of course, is always an asset and Michelangelo is a name to conjure with. But neither of the words that follow “divine” does justice to a show that is, in essence, a retrospective of a master who transformed Western painting, sculpture, and architecture beyond recognition. Because most of Michelangelo's works, by their

James Gardner's latest book is Buenos Aires: The Biography of a City.

**Michelangelo**  
*Divine Draftsman and Designer*  
Metropolitan Museum of Art  
through February 12

very nature, cannot travel—being frescoes, architectural sculptures, or buildings—they are represented at the Met through drawings and, where possible, paintings and sculptures. Fortunately, Michelangelo was one of the greatest draftsmen in history, and the Met has now assembled the largest collection of his drawings ever seen, or ever likely to be seen, in one place.

If the Met had done nothing more than bring these drawings together, as was the case with its Leonardo exhibition of 2003, the present show would stand as a landmark, surpassing even the 1988 exhibition of Michelangelo drawings at the National Gallery in Washington. But this new show is much more than that. Sprawled across 10 enormous galleries, it displays some of Michelangelo's more portable sculptures and panel paintings and even some wooden architectural models assembled under his supervision. Also included is a generous sampling of works by forebears, contemporaries, and followers. The result is a panoptic



survey of a career that spanned nearly 70 years. In telling this tale, curator Carmen C. Bambach never oversimplifies. Instead she pays us the supreme compliment of assuming that we are willing to pore over architectural renderings and nearly incoherent squiggles, no less than depictions of the human form, like *The Archers* and *The Fall of Phaeton*, that are perfect and complete works of art in their own right.

Only two figures in the history of art, Bernini and Picasso, can rival Michelangelo (1475-1564) in the degree of their influence on their respective ages: Bernini as an architect and sculptor and Picasso as a sculptor and painter. But Michelangelo's influence was incalculably greater, and not only because it touched all three provinces of visual culture. Conceptually his influence can be divided into two strains, one fortuitous, the other inevitable. If Michelangelo imposed on his generation certain preoccupations with the human form that had always obsessed him, he was also the instrument by which Western painting attained something it had fervently sought for 100 years—the effective depiction of human movement in two dimensions. Perhaps it could have reached that goal without him, but only much later and in a different form.

Born to a banker who had fallen on hard times, Michelangelo Buonarroti began to draw and sculpt at a young age. But he drew in order to sculpt, and to the end of his life he saw himself as a sculptor and nothing else. In fact, he was apt to prove downright testy when anyone, even a prince or pope, tried to divert his energies from marble to painting and architecture. Many of his finest, most finished drawings at the Met were created as models for other painters, like Daniele da Volterra and Marcello Venusti, precisely so that he himself would not have to complete the commissions.

It is ironic then that however great his sculpture was, he had less influence on that medium than on painting and architecture. Even the *Pietà* in Saint Peter's and the *David* in Florence had surprisingly little direct influence on the practice of his contemporaries. As



Above, detail from the drawing *Three Labors of Hercules* (ca. 1530), showing the young hero killing the Nemean lion. Opposite, detail from *Archers Shooting at a Herm* (also ca. 1530), a drawing in which the athletic nudes are mostly shown without their bows and arrows, 'perhaps,' the curator writes, 'to disencumber the complex composition.'

for later works like the rough-hewn *Brutus* of 1538, which is included in the present show, their influence was even slighter. Perhaps Michelangelo's sculptures were too eccentric, too much the product of his almost morbid introspection. Especially in his later pieces, he seems to approach quarried stone like some elemental Titan confronting Mother Earth herself. We feel we are witnessing a thrilling encounter to which we should not be privy.

Such was not the case with his paintings. One of the revelations of this exhibition, perhaps inadvertent,

is Michelangelo's singleminded focus on the human form. Nothing else interests him, at least not as a subject for two-dimensional representation. It is unlikely that he drew or painted more than three trees in his entire career. The landscaped backgrounds of the Sistine Chapel ceiling are schematic to the point of evasion, and Michelangelo, a committed neo-Platonist, seems almost unwilling to acknowledge the material world around him—the objects and animals. Rather it is in the human body itself, usually nude, that Michelangelo finds the measure of all that is worth knowing and seeing.

Since the middle of the 15th century, Tuscan artists, among them Pollaiuolo and Botticelli, had tried to depict human movement in two dimensions. But these attempts always failed. Sculptors, however, having access to ancient precedents that painters lacked, had known how to do this for decades. And it was Michelangelo, the sculptor par excellence, who solved the problem by transposing the lessons of sculpture to the art of painting. Only compare his early relief sculpture *Battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs* with the static images of Ghirlandaio and Granacci in the Met exhibition. Then look at the figures on the Sistine ceiling from 20 years later—effectively conveyed at the Met

by a large-scale reproduction suspended from the ceiling: Even the seated sibyls and prophets, to say nothing of the torqued nudes and Adam and the Almighty with their outstretched arms, are infused with movement. For the next 300 years, down to the French Revolution and beyond, the forms that were born on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel would continue to populate Western painting. Never again would the stiffness of Botticelli and Piero della Francesca seem tolerable in the work of a living artist of the Old Masters tradition.



Michelangelo made one other contribution to the art of painting that has been almost universally overlooked. For centuries we had been told, by the 16th-century art historian Giorgio Vasari and others, that Titian and the Venetians were great colorists, but that Michelangelo, in his preoccupation with *disegno*—the drawn line—had no interest in such things. And yet, with the cleaning of the Sistine Chapel frescoes in the 1980s and 1990s and the Pauline Chapel in the past decade, it should now be obvious to everyone that, in fact, Michelangelo was one of the finest, subtlest, and most original colorists in the history of art. These colors, in their unstable iridescence, reject the deep saturation of the Venetians. And although they too are the eccentric reflex of Michelangelo's most private preoccupations, such was his influence that they stood at the chromatic core of European painting deep into the 17th century.

It is likely that most visitors to the Met exhibition will come for the figural drawings and the sculptures rather than for the architectural sheets. But these as well are hallowed, since they enable us to see Michelangelo, as though in real time, working through those formal problems that would result in the Palazzo Farnese, the Biblioteca Laurenziana, and Saint Peter's Basilica. If you find yourself, anywhere in the world, standing before a classical building constructed after 1550, there is a good chance that it bears some direct or implicit debt to Michelangelo.

Finally, mention should be made of those numerous drawing sheets at the Met that contain, in Michelangelo's own hand, copies of the poems he composed. It is not widely known outside of Italy that he was one of that country's most important lyric poets of the 16th century. His sonnets are often difficult going, written as they are in a harsh and lithic Tuscan, but they have a rough beauty and a beguiling honesty to them. As such, they offer an invaluable glimpse into the character of a man who might otherwise remain concealed beneath the visual ravishment of his sundry arts. ♦



# Othering Whites

*Misfits, morals, and bourgeois norms.*

BY JAMES BOWMAN

Now it can be told: In 1968, I was one of those who got "clean for Gene." I cut my hair and put on a jacket and tie to campaign for Senator Eugene McCarthy in the Democratic primaries of that year. Those of us who did so understood without having to have the matter explained to us that we were likely to do more harm than good to the McCarthyite and thus the anti-Vietnam war cause if we presented ourselves to people in our natural, hippyish state. It seemed a small sacrifice to make, and the more so when compared with that being made by our coevals in Vietnam, when voters (of which I was not yet one) on the left as well as the right expected politicians and their representatives to present a respectable, middle-class appearance.

Still today, even far-left politicians rarely eschew the coat and tie if they hope to get elected. But many ivory-tower intellectuals now feel free to identify middle-class respectability—as much of behavior as of appearance—as the class enemy. Consider what happened after law professors Amy Wax and Larry Alexander published an article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* last August arguing that many of the ills of modern society are connected to a breakdown of mid-20th-century "bourgeois norms," which "laid out the script we were all supposed to follow":

Get married before you have children and strive to stay married for their sake. Get the education you need for gainful employment, work hard, and avoid idleness. Go the

## American Misfits and the Making of Middle-Class Respectability

by Robert Wuthnow  
Princeton, 352 pp., \$35

extra mile for your employer or client. Be a patriot, ready to serve the country. Be neighborly, civic-minded, and charitable. Avoid coarse language in public. Be respectful of authority. Eschew substance abuse and crime.

The academic community's cries of outrage could be heard from the University of Pennsylvania, where Wax teaches, to the University of San Diego, where Alexander does. Several of their protesting colleagues suggested that endorsing the "bourgeois" values Wax and Alexander listed is tantamount to white supremacy.

Put into plain English, the idea sounds preposterous, which is why it rarely is put into plain English and instead is couched in academic jargon. One example, borrowed from "post-colonial studies," has to do with what is called "othering" as a technique of oppression—originally of subject peoples by colonial powers. Robert Wuthnow, in his new book *American Misfits and the Making of Middle-Class Respectability*, uses the term to describe the middle-class social and economic hegemony over such marginal figures as hucksters and peddlers, lunatics, religious zealots, immigrants, and naughty children. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Wuthnow writes, they were treated by the bourgeois culture as "liminal" groups on the disputed borderlands of the rising middle class.

For most of its length, Wuthnow's book avoids making overtly political points and merely tells stories about the fringe categories, devoting

James Bowman, resident scholar at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, is the author of *Honor: A History*.

a chapter to each. In addition, there is a chapter on the rich, because, particularly during the Progressive era, they were also regarded with suspicion as being “other” than the newly identified “common people” of the middle class, among whom the sort of norms now so disapproved of by the academic left were thought particularly to reside. “The wealthy may have been admired,” he writes, “but newspapers, sermons, and fiction castigated them as cold, heartless persons who ran soulless corporations and pursued superficial pleasures.”

Among those who use the word “othering” unselfconsciously and without quotation marks, this view of it is not a common one. In fact, Wuthnow himself hardly uses it until his final chapter, to which he gives that title. The chapter will be heavy going for anyone not used to the quasi-Marxist vocabulary of ideological progressivism. But it is less than nine pages long and worth making the effort to get through because, although it is not overtly so, it amounts to a critique of the sort of race-based ideological social science favored by the critics of Wax and Alexander. Race and 19th-century notions of white supremacy are mentioned along the way, but they have little or nothing to do with the sorts of discrimination Wuthnow’s book primarily deals with.

Wuthnow even dares to question the now-commonplace equation of “othering” with “whiteness”—which he writes is “an empty cultural category that masks the diversity it contains.”

The usefulness of “whiteness,” however, from a propagandist’s point of view, is that a skilled manipulator of the jargon can purport to demonstrate that Donald Trump—or, indeed, anyone else—is a white supremacist merely by being (a) white (though even this requirement may be waived for those who only “act white”) and (b) in favor of one or more of the things that the mostly white middle classes used to be in favor of, irrespective of one’s actual views on race. Wuthnow, by demonizing the middle class without ignoring its actual tendency to exclude the morally (or mannerly) marginal,

gains some credibility on behalf of progressive social science, making it at least potentially something more than a hunt for new classes of victims of “bourgeois culture” (or “whiteness” or “imperialism” or “capitalism” or what have you).

Wuthnow’s argument about the marginal communities calls the whole idea of “othering” into, well, if not doubt then banality. For doesn’t the social marginalization of certain groups, including the greedy,

*Academics suggested that endorsing certain ‘bourgeois’ values is tantamount to white supremacism. Put into plain English, the idea sounds preposterous, which is why it rarely is put into plain English and instead is couched in academic jargon.*

corrupt, and pleasure-seeking rich, merely show that it is inherent in the very idea of morality that it will somehow exclude those who do not behave according to its strictures? And aren’t the academics who are protesting against even a sympathetic account of bourgeois values every bit as much in the exclusion business as those they so disapprove of?

In other words, Wuthnow’s book, though it is full of interesting facts about the historical mechanisms of discrimination, conceptually hovers on the edge of tautology. An exclusive system excludes people; a tried-and-true method for some people to “get ahead” (as it used to be called) is always going to involve some other people being gotten ahead of. Making such heavy weather out of such an obvious fact typically arises out of the same political impulse given expression by the critics of Amy Wax and Larry

Alexander, critics who take it for granted that inequality is *malum in se* and that true morality requires that there shall be no getting ahead so that there can be no falling behind.

Wuthnow’s book would also have benefited from a bit more in the way of contextualization for its narrowly American focus, especially in the chapter on naughty children. The novels and stories and chapbooks and cautionary tales meant to propagandize for middle-class ideas of good behavior had their counterparts in most if not all Western countries. Many, like Heinrich Hoffmann’s *Der Struwwelpeter*, were even more sternly moralistic than any of the American or English examples Wuthnow cites. Likewise, his mention that, to the American middle classes, “fanatics were like people in less civilized parts of the world who believed in magic” suggests a comparison to the self-described “civilizing mission” of the European colonial powers, but this is not followed up—perhaps because it would be one invitation too many to intervention by the p.c. police.

But Wuthnow deserves commendation for thinking more creatively about discrimination and its ideological twin, “othering,” than many of his colleagues in the social sciences, and in the process making a real contribution to social history as it used to be understood, before it got so politicized. He has even provided an amusing precedent for the middle-class respectability, or the remains of it, that I was trying to propitiate in 1968. It turns out that in 1820, a widely circulated account about a group of religious fanatics called the Pilgrims in central Pennsylvania (where I was being clean for Gene almost a century and a half later) described them as marked by their deviation “from generally accepted expectations about dress, cleanliness, posture, and language.” The group lived communally, and their “quarters were strewn with dirty blankets, the people wore rotten garments, and their hair was matted.” Useful to know that the hippies were around even way back then—before being whipped back into line, no doubt, by a more energetic sort of middle-class respectability than anything now surviving. ♦





# Still Shrugging

*Sixty years of Ayn Rand's polemical novel.*

BY CATHY YOUNG

**T**he Russian Revolution, the centennial of which has just passed, changed the world in more ways than one can count. But one little-noticed way in which it affected American intellectual life was by giving us Ayn Rand.

Born Alisa Rosenbaum into the family of a successful Russian Jewish businessman, the future novelist was 12 when the Bolsheviks took power and dispossessed her family. Nine years later, she fled to the United States, where she found her ideal of a free, individualistic, vibrant society—and saw it threatened by, she felt, the same forces of collectivism from which she had escaped. For the rest of her life as a writer, thinker, and crusader, Rand fought against the specter of communism and for her vision of freedom, often in controversial ways. Her “Objectivist” philosophy preached rationalism, atheism, strength, and selfishness (conditional, it should be noted, on respecting the rights of others). The liberal establishment despised and hated her, especially because of her influence on young people. Conservatives appreciated her anticommunism and defense of the free market but were scandalized by her rejection of religion and Christian morality. Even libertarians, in some respects her philosophical stepchildren, have had a complex love/hate relationship with Rand.

Decades after Rand's death, her influence endures, including at the highest levels of American power. As recently as 2005, House speaker Paul Ryan effusively praised Rand and her work



*Ayn Rand in New York City, 1957*

building a “moral case for capitalism” (though later he repudiated her “atheist philosophy” in an interview and seemed to write off his interest in Rand as a youthful infatuation). Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas is apparently a fan. So, reportedly, is Donald Trump (even if many Rand supporters believe that if he were in a Rand novel he'd be one of the baddies). Between 2008 and 2014, *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand's magnum opus, dropped off the top-10 list of Americans' favorite books, but it has no shortage of ardent champions, including Angelina Jolie and a handful of other Hollywood figures. (Alas, this has not saved the recent three-part movie made from the book, a wretched affair notable mainly for its complete recasting of each installment.)

At the gala held in New York last month by the Atlas Society to commemorate the 60th anniversary of *Atlas Shrugged*, the keynote speaker was businessman and author Andy Puzder,

who almost became Labor secretary in the Trump administration. Puzder takes his Rand devotion quite seriously: He says that his six children had to read *The Fountainhead* as a condition for getting their driver's permits.

In her own remarks at the gala, Atlas Society CEO Jennifer Grossman offered a ringing defense of the value of Rand and talked about the group's efforts to get her included in college curricula. Modern-day college students are “not going to start with Bastiat,” she said, referring to the 19th-century French classical liberal economist. “To lose Ayn Rand as a pathway to liberty would be a great strategic error.”

Rand is a more interesting and worthy writer and thinker than she is generally given credit for by liberals and conservatives alike—but I have my doubts about *Atlas Shrugged* as a good pathway to pro-freedom ideas. Like so many other young people, I had an Ayn Rand phase at the age of 20 or so, which ended when I read (or tried to read) *Atlas* in its entirety. I thought it had some excellent descriptive writing and two genuinely riveting characters—railway executive Dagny Taggart, a surprisingly nuanced mix of strength, ardor, and vulnerability; and steel magnate Hank Rearden, torn between his passion for Dagny and his self-respect as a married man who honors his commitments. There's also an interesting, unpredictable storyline involving an idealistic shopgirl who marries Dagny's scummy brother James thinking he's a heroic achiever; she suffers a tragic disillusionment.

Unfortunately, what good there is in the book gets lost in endless speechifying (by the time she got to *Atlas*, Rand had never met a point she didn't feel compelled to repeat five or six times in a row), a large cast of grotesquely caricatured bad guys (and gals), and an even larger cast of intellectual straw men. If a character argues that a business owner has some obligations to his family, Rand must take it all the way to the claim that it's his duty to hire a completely incompetent relative.

Worse, the book has a troubling streak of cruelty, most obvious in the scene involving a horrific train crash

*Cathy Young is a columnist for Newsday and a contributing editor to Reason.*

NEW YORK TIMES CO. / GETTY

caused by bureaucratic incompetence and arrogance. In an infamous sequence, Rand offers a rogue's gallery of doomed passengers who, she clearly implies, brought it on themselves by their wrong-think: the philosophy professor who denies objective reality, the ignorant housewife who thinks she has "the right to elect politicians" to control industries, the anti-property-rights economist, the elderly schoolteacher who has taught kids that right and wrong are determined by the will of the majority, etc. We are informed that "there was not a man aboard the train who did not share one or more of their ideas." Rand fans have told me that she's not blaming the passengers, only saying their bad ideas have a systemic influence that, in various ways, contributes to the cause of the crash. Yet Rand introduces her poison-pen character vignettes by darkly noting that "there were those who would have said that the passengers of the Comet were not guilty or responsible for the thing that happened to them"—clearly suggesting that they *should* be seen as guilty. This is morally perverse, and disturbingly similar to the left-wing, radical belief that no one complicit in "oppression" is innocent.

*Atlas* has had no shortage of critics over the years—dating back at least to Whittaker Chambers's famously scathing review in *National Review* in 1957—and even some of the book's admirers would concede that it has problems, including its black-and-white moral, political, and economic vision and its adamant insistence that people with "wrong" altruistic ideas are never sincere and always after power. Yet, granting all that, one may still believe that Rand's ringing defense of individualism, reason, and achievement should be in the mix of ideas presented to high school or college students, particularly at a time when various flavors of collectivism—some old, like socialism, and some new, like identity politics—seem to be growing in strength among the young.

Rand was not one to accept partial or qualified agreement: You either saw the light or did not. Yet perhaps the best way to ensure that her work gets its proper due is to approach it like that

of any other author, with both appreciation and critique, agreeing with some ideas and rejecting others. The Atlas Society, which has parted ways with some other Randians—its founder and recently retired CEO David Kelley joked at the gala that they are "still fighting over custody of Objectivism"—has moved toward such an approach. Even atheism is negotiable: In her talk, Grossman described herself as an "amorphous Christian" and argued that reaching out to people of faith can clear a "potential stumbling block" to bringing people to Rand. Puzder, a Catholic, also told the audience that he sees no essential contradiction between religion and Rand.

My own recommended reading list for the discovery of Rand is *The Fountainhead* and *We the Living*, Rand's

only book about Soviet Russia. Both were written before Rand's thought solidified into dogma and before the ideologue in her crushed her writerly talent. And both show that she is capable of nuance and empathy—not to mention recognizably human dialogue. But something about *Atlas Shrugged*'s combination of utopia and dystopia clearly strikes a chord with a portion of the American public.

*Atlas* will never be hailed as the Great American Novel, although it will likely continue to win new fans. Perhaps we should be grateful for its semi-fringe, semi-cult status: glad that its call for liberty still resonates, and glad, too, that our condition is not so bleak that the book's radical morality would widely be accepted as the best cure for what ails us. ♦



## (Super)man's Best Friend

*The movies ignore the best thing about the Man of Steel: his dog, Krypto.* BY STEVEN J. LENZNER

**I**n the new *Justice League* movie, Batman, Wonder Woman, and other superheroes from DC Comics join forces to (what else?) save the world. While Superman is not a leading character in the film, it all takes place in his shadow. If last year's *Batman v Superman* depicted a world coping with the fact that Superman's existence is a magnet for apocalyptic villains of all stripes, the new movie shows that his absence attracts malefactors, too.

Whether present or absent, Superman, it seems, is a problem. Perhaps no fictional character is as well known a symbol of America, even if in recent years he has dropped his mantra of "truth, justice, and the American way."

(And is not that dropping representative of the unfortunate loss of American self-confidence over the last decade or so?) Yet he is a singularly poor exemplar of the American way. Superman represents excellence as bodily perfection wedded to good intentions, a combination that is positively illiberal: It makes Superman a busybody who without license interferes in others' affairs, not infrequently with disastrous results for the community.

To see just how perverse Superman is, contrast him with Lex Luthor, Superman's archnemesis of long standing. It is no accident that Luthor, a man distinguished above all not by his criminality but his surpassing genius, is Superman's foremost foe. For Superman, mind is the enemy. Superman himself—at least as he is typically portrayed—is to be sure not stupid, but the

*Steven J. Lenzner is a research fellow in political philosophy at Claremont McKenna College.*





qualities for which he is consistently praised do not include anything reminiscent of brilliance. And the quality by which he is most distinguished—a disinterested love of humanity—is anything but a virtue.

The best articulation of the problem of Superman can be found in *Lex Luthor: Man of Steel*, written by Brian Azzarello and published in 2005. In the center of that work Luthor sets forth the danger of Superman, with a view to securing assistance to allay it, to a most skeptical audience: Luthor's fellow billionaire Bruce Wayne. Luthor makes a two-part case against Superman, beginning with simple considerations of prudence: Whatever one may think of Superman's intentions, it is sheer folly not to seek protection from an individual for whom the only fence against his global tyranny is self-denial: "What if tomorrow he wakes up believing he knows what's best for us? That it's not enough to pro-

tect the world, when he can rule it? The only safeguard against that happening is his word. And I say—his word—is not enough. Even if you believe it, does it make sense to accept it?"

But, Luthor continues, Superman is not merely a threat for what he might one day do to mankind; he is also the driving force on the path to Nietzsche's last man. By making everything mere humans can do seem insignificant, Superman destroys all striving and aspiration:

I'm not interested in bringing him down, but obsessed with bringing us up. All of us—everyone—deserves a chance at greatness. All that takes is the belief that it exists. But his existence threatens not just that belief—but our existence. I believe there's something inherently dangerous when something real becomes mythic. I believe when that happens we lose the part of ourselves that yearns to be great. ... So the mythic must be exposed for what it is, so we can believe in ourselves.

In a wonderful dramatic turnaround, we bear witness to the conversion of Superman's closest comic-book ally to the side of his greatest nemesis.

Whatever problem Superman represents to humanity is exacerbated by his orientation to it: He aspires to love humankind as a whole, which makes him a peculiarly unattractive individual. We can put Superman's shortcomings in the clearest relief by contrasting his example with that of one of his companions in the comic books, a truly admirable being: his dog, Krypto, the last canine of Krypton.

Consider the storyline in *The Coming of Atlas*, a brilliant 2008 story written by James Robinson that highlights Superman's seemingly Olympian indifference to the personal and individual and contrasts it with Krypto's love of the particular. The story is—at least for the world of comics—deceptively simple. Superman's unscrupulous father-in-law, General Sam Lane, has manipulated the timestream to bring Atlas, a magical being with the power to challenge Superman, to the present. On the verge of being defeated, Superman is brought back from the brink by the intercession of Krypto.

We readers are shown Krypto's thoughts—and those thoughts, both in form and content, show him to be a model dog. Krypto thinks only in the present tense, employing—to the extent possible—one-syllable words with concision; that is to say, he thinks as one would imagine a dog thinking. Moreover, the content of his thoughts goes far toward explaining the old adage that dog is a Kryptonian's best friend. Krypto is, as befits a good American dog, deeply concerned with his happiness—and what makes him happy, above all, is his master's praise: "Good boy." The first word of the story is Krypto's ("Man"), as is the last word ("Happy"). And in between Krypto displays the cardinal canine virtues: loyalty, courage, and affection. Krypto loves his friends and hates his enemies. And his circle of friends has a limited radius. He has none of that easy and indiscriminate affection that diminishes the charm of a dog's love for its master.

Krypto's longest speech occurs

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when he explains why he is risking his life to help Superman safeguard Metropolis: “Man. This one hurt man. Krypto loves man—Krypto *hurt* this one. Man loves place. I *protect* place for man. Krypto good boy.” Superman is not unappreciative, but his appreciation reveals his inability to see beyond his own worldview, according to which all noble beings are motivated by nothing but heroic selflessness and universal philanthropy perhaps sweetened by popular adulation. At the end of the story—immediately after Krypto’s actions have enabled Superman to vanquish Atlas—Superman rewards Krypto by an impromptu speech to the gathered witnesses of Metropolis: “Can you *hear* me Metropolis? *Can you hear me?* You want to *cheer* a hero?! *This is a hero!* He’s my dog and you know *what—now* he’s *your* dog too.” So Krypto’s reward for risking his life exclusively for—and because of his love of—his master is to be symbolically given away by the self-same master.

Robinson’s (and Krypto’s) critique of Superman may be summarized thus: The aspiration to love everyone makes it impossible, or virtually impossible, to love anyone properly. In *The Coming of Atlas*, Superman overcomes this unnatural indifference only when dealing with his wife, Lois Lane. With her he is an altogether different—and far more appealing—being. He shows a deep awareness of her needs and acts in a manner that befits a lover with his beloved. When she expresses a certain insecurity due to Superman’s dealings with a woman who is both beautiful and powerful, Superman—or rather Clark Kent—reassures Lois: “*Yeah*, she’s beautiful, but *you* are the most beautiful woman in the world, which I have flown across and around *many* times, so I should know.” Superman’s love for Lois distinguishes him from the doctor mentioned in *The Brothers Karamazov*: “The more I love mankind in general,” he says, “the less I love people in particular.” This doctor claims he would be willing to do anything for humanity, “would really have gone to the cross for people,” but is “incapable of living in the same room with anyone

for even two days.” At least Superman has Lois—or does when he’s in his private capacity. But when in uniform, he is, as it were, uniformly tone-deaf.

There are any number of additional critiques of Superman that can be offered, but his alien indifference and the ways in which his immense power

might diminish human aspiration should suffice to make the thoughtful reconsider Superman’s merits. Fortunately, a solution is ready at hand: In the comics and movies, he should never go anywhere without Krypto. Maybe in time the Man of Steel can learn a thing or two from his dog. ♦



# Irregular Loves

*Adultery, friendship, and the story of a life.*

BY B.D. McCLAY

What would the novel do without adultery? Invent it, one supposes. Even these days, when adultery might seem easier than ever—there are specialized dating websites and discussion forums at your disposal—it still retains its fascination for the storyteller. In part, this is because infidelity immediately generates a *story*, pulling the reader into the gap between reality and presentation, what you want and what you want to want. Adultery places duty and desire at the center of its story; it creates an explosive secret; and its protagonists, sometimes even a wronged spouse, receive from us a curious mix of sympathy and disgust.

Everyone in *Conversations with Friends*, a remarkable first novel from the Irish writer Sally Rooney, is involved in infidelities of various kinds. College students Bobbi and Frances, ex-girlfriends turned best friends, perform live poetry readings. (Frances writes the poetry, but as she tells it, Bobbi is the performing talent.) This brings them into the orbit of Melissa, a prominent local writer. Melissa invites them to dinner; Bobbi is smitten with Melissa; at dinner they are introduced to Nick, Melissa’s depressive husband, an actor who sits solidly in the mediocre space between

## Conversations with Friends

by Sally Rooney  
Hogarth, 320 pp., \$26

failure and success. It’s this combination of uneasy and unstable relationships that drives the story.

Some of the infidelities are small: pursuing and flaunting a new friendship, fictionalizing an episode of somebody else’s life. Some are medium-sized: accidentally-on-purpose giving away a painful secret. And some are big: Nick and Frances begin an email correspondence and then, eventually, an affair.

At this point a certain kind of reader is already rolling her eyes. The washed-up married man and the promising young girl is one of the most well-worn of stories. But *Conversations with Friends* is narrated by Frances and the story is more concerned with her than with Nick. What kind of a woman is drawn into this situation?

One who can’t admit she wants anything is one answer. As everyone in the story seems to recognize, Frances is a talented writer and intensely intellectual. She nourishes deep attachments to others but maintains a careful distance. Her parents are divorced and her father is an alcoholic whom Frances, with only apparent indifference, watches spiral deeper into addiction. She herself is mysteriously ill,

*B.D. McClay is a senior editor at the Hedgehog Review.*

racked with sudden and inexplicable pains that she does her best to ignore. Despite all of these ties to the world, however, Frances cultivates within herself a deep emptiness. If she could be nothing, she would. Or so she thinks.

Frances is a particular *kind* of youthful person: an intelligent, wary woman who counts on her intelligence and her foresight to protect herself from feeling. Instead, she discovers that her careful detachment does not save her from feeling real love and real loss. Over the course of the story, Frances loses the people close to her. The mysterious pain is endometriosis, a lifelong illness that may mean she has lost the ability to have children before knowing if she even wants them.

So while Frances's affair with Nick is one of the emotional threads of the novel—and certainly an important one—it's hardly the only one. There's her writing, her health, and her father. But the real center of Frances's emotional life is Bobbi. It's the false start of Bobbi's own attraction to Melissa that pushes Frances toward Nick in the first place, and it's her conversations with Bobbi that Frances returns to and seeks guidance from throughout the book.

Frances grew up with the latest technology at her disposal and so has always had the ability to record and revisit herself. Thanks to this, she is always watching herself in the mirror, waiting for the future to have happened so that she can wash her hands of it. Meanwhile, her art is aggressively ephemeral: She can't bear to print any of her poems and will perform them for, at most, six months.

Frances treats her life as a *text*, something she can step back from and interpret as she will. She is constantly "reading" her past, trying to understand her mistakes in speaking, watching videos and looking at pictures to better know herself or others.

In every practical sense, Frances is adrift—without money or much of a job, and, eventually, without friends—but she's always in control, or trying to be. There's a way to *get through this* and not be touched at all. When possible,

she denies feeling, escaping into intellectual abstraction. "I always had negative feelings about authority figures ... but really only when I met you did I formulate the feelings into beliefs," she writes to Bobbi—instead of a simple "I miss you." Her intellectual interests are real—Frances is a Communist and many of her conversations are political—but they're also a shield. That Frances's desire to be numb to feeling and consequence is also a deep depression escapes her, though not the reader.

When Frances begins her affair with Nick, she's giving herself half of something to prove she doesn't want it, though she doesn't realize this until it's too late. It's *safe*, or so she thinks, until it turns out she loves and needs somebody she'll never have. To this dilemma, openness, whatever its virtues, isn't a solution: Nick and Frances attempt to be open with Melissa and Bobbi, but this collapses under needs that Frances can't help but have. She comes to the humiliating realization that she longs for love as much as any other human being.

"I was like an empty cup," Frances says after the end of her affair, a cup that "Nick had emptied out, and now I had to look at what had spilled out of me: all my delusional beliefs about my own value and my pretensions to being a kind of person I wasn't." The great burden Frances must face is not her loves for Nick or Bobbi, which can never quite be what she requires, but instead her normality: that she has a body, emotional needs; that these are both worth taking seriously and yet, at the same time, not special and not in her control.

Recognizing the inescapability and indeed banality of one's own desires, failings, needs—one place to do this is religion, where one's everyday failings can be both made smaller and transfigured. Frances begins to read the Bible and even goes to church, where she prays and collapses out of pain. Before she faints, she experiences a vision, seeing herself as part of a community of others:

Someone once made this pew I'm sitting on, I thought. Someone sanded the wood and varnished it.

Someone carried it into the church. Someone laid the tiles on the floor, someone fitted the windows. Each brick was placed by human hands, each hinge fitted on each door, every road surface outside, every bulb in every streetlight. ... Who put me here in this church, thinking these thoughts? Other people, some I know very well and others I have never met. Am I myself, or am I them? Is this me, Frances? No, it is not me. It is the others.

Rooney, carefully, doesn't overplay this moment. Frances is changed, slightly. She seeks forgiveness and strives to be a better person, but stops short of conversion. "A certain peace had come to me," she reflects, "and I wondered if it was God's doing after all. Not that God existed in any material way but as a shared cultural practice so widespread that it came to seem materially real, like language or gender."

A love affair is a free fall: It stops, but it doesn't resolve. Frances ends the book better off in some ways and not in others; problems of love and of the body cannot be solved, only lived. She recognizes that she'll suffer, that she'll love someone she can't really have, and that these will simply stay true. She remains her wary self, willing to accept she might be such a ridiculous thing as a human being, not quite willing to swallow such a ridiculous thing as God.

There's another relationship that doesn't have a true resolution—friendship, that cautious proceeding of two parallel lines. Where adultery opposes love and duty, friendship attempts a fusion. After her experience in the church, it's Bobbi that Frances reaches out to and Bobbi who once again rises to friendship's peculiar demands. Love can be disappointing, out of reach, and incomplete. A friendship can be so intimate as to be a comfort and an irritation. As ordinary and unspecial as our loves are, their joys and satisfactions and frustrations nonetheless *are* our lives and important for that reason. No matter how undignified it can be to be a human being, it's the love and connections between us that create our stories. As Frances comes to realize, it's not you; it's the others. ♦





# Evil on the Rails

*The details that make the detective.*

BY JOHN PODHORETZ

Last summer, to prepare for the upcoming movie version, I reread Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*. Christie was the bestselling writer of the 20th century and *Murder on the Orient Express* is one of her most famous works. But I found it almost agonizingly tedious. It reads more like the schematic of a great mystery novel than a mystery novel itself. Though it centers on the aftermath of the kidnapping and murder of a child, the book itself comes across as self-satisfied, tetchy, and emotionless as its detective, Hercule Poirot.

Then I made the mistake of renting and watching the 1974 movie directed by Sidney Lumet, which I remembered with great fondness for its jaunty recreation of lavish Depression-era travel and its multinational celebrity cast. Alas, my memory was flawed, because the movie stinks. It's incredibly slow and oddly underplotted and it plays not as a murder mystery but an overstuffed comedy like *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*. Almost nothing happens in its first 30 minutes. And when we finally get to the Istanbul train station from which the Orient Express is departing, it plays like a version of the opening three minutes of *Fantasy Island*, during which Mr. Roarke introduces all the guests and we get to see Carol Lynley as a stewardess who wants to go back to high school and Bert Convy as a stationery salesman who wants to find Bigfoot. Look! It's Richard Widmark! Isn't that Anthony Perkins? Hey, it's Jacqueline Bisset! Ingrid Bergman playing a missionary! And buried under that makeup as Poirot—why, it's Albert Finney!

John Podhoretz, editor of Commentary, is THE WEEKLY STANDARD's movie critic.

## Murder on the Orient Express

Directed by Kenneth Branagh



Kenneth Branagh as Hercule Poirot

The criticism, and there's a lot of it, of the new *Murder on the Orient Express* is that it is impure and anachronistic. Kenneth Branagh directed and stars, and he tries to make Poirot a comprehensible character rather than an assemblage of tics and eccentricities. To this end, his Poirot is driven by obsessive-compulsive behavior rather than conceited and misanthropic snobbery—a fond friend and a perfectly nice fellow, but he is cursed with an eye that can spot the imperfection in anything. He cannot bear to eat eggs that aren't perfectly proportioned. He can see how the tiniest crack in a wall will reveal the identity of a thief.

While Christie's Poirot is pompous about his genius, screenwriter Michael Green (who also wrote this year's *Logan* and cowrote *Blade Runner 2049*) makes Poirot an unwilling savant. The eye for imperfection that makes him the world's greatest detective also causes him unnecessary suffering. And unlike the somewhat Nietzschean Poirot of Christie's creation, who has

an entirely clinical view of killing, the Branagh-Green Poirot has a profound moral sense and uses it in part to help him solve the murder.

The OCD stuff is a perfectly acceptable gloss on Christie's characterization of Poirot as a man obsessed with symmetry, who arranges his books by height. But the emotionalism of Branagh's Poirot is certainly something new. He also seems rather evolved, especially on matters of race and religion. This is a radical revision of his creator's worldview, given that Christie freely used the N-word in the title of a novel and was a classically tweedy British anti-Semite.

Well, I'm not a Christie purist, to put it mildly, so I found the new Poirot an affecting companion on this *Murder on the Orient Express*, which is in almost every respect the superior of the movie that preceded it. It's beautiful to look at, moves swiftly, and establishes its cast of potential killers more efficiently. Johnny Depp does a terrific turn as a lowlife art thief trying and failing to put on airs, and Michelle Pfeiffer offers a multilayered performance as a theatrical divorcee who is far more theatrical than anyone can imagine.

The movie's greatest failing is the novel's. The event that sets the story in motion is a kidnapping inspired by the Lindbergh baby case. Christie contrived to get the baby's killer and a whole bunch of other Americans involved in the matter out of Long Island and on a train from Istanbul to Calais two years later. It was ridiculously implausible when the book came out in 1934 and it's no less ridiculous now.

What Green and Branagh add to the proceedings is a feeling of outrage at the original crime and the effect its consequences might have not only on everyone who had to survive it but also on the detective who finds himself involved after the fact. This is an immeasurable improvement on the original, and it makes their *Murder on the Orient Express* a surprisingly powerful and involving film. You might even enjoy it more if you choose masochistically to see it only after you experience the utter tedium of the book and the cheesy lousiness of the old movie. ♦

TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX

***"President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke for 'a little over an hour' Tuesday morning, discussing a range of pressing international concerns a day after Putin met with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a White House official told CNN."***

***—CNN, November 21, 2017***

**PARODY**

PHONE CALL BETWEEN PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP  
AND RUSSIAN PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN

NOVEMBER 21, 2017

OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPT

(cont'd)

in the shower?

PRESIDENT TRUMP: Yes, he was in the shower. And, believe me, Charlie Rose is not exactly Michelangelo's "David."

PRESIDENT PUTIN: Oh, I know. I once sat across from him wondering who this talking skeleton was.

PRESIDENT TRUMP: Yeah, he's no Adonis like you and me.

PRESIDENT PUTIN: Da, not like me. Reminds me of Russian joke: Two old naked men streak past two old ladies. One lady says, "What was that?" The other says, "I don't know, but whatever it was, it needs ironing!"

PRESIDENT TRUMP: Oh, that's good. I might steal that joke. I'm speaking to a group of seniors later. High school seniors.

PRESIDENT PUTIN: Go ahead and steal it. It wouldn't be the first time you've stolen something! I kid!

PRESIDENT TRUMP: Can we move on? We were supposed to talk about a range of pressing international concerns.

PRESIDENT PUTIN: Yes, let us move on. Who will CBS get to replace Charlie on the morning show?

PRESIDENT TRUMP: Not Glenn Thrush, I can tell you that. Or as they are now saying on Twitter, Glenn "Thrust."

PRESIDENT PUTIN: Yes, you like that one? I came up with that myself and ordered my bots to, well... Syria! We need to discuss Syria!

PRESIDENT TRUMP: Hold on now, you came up with that? That's pretty good. Did you see I called Senator Jeff Flake of Arizona Jeff "Flake(y)"? Because he's flakey.

PRESIDENT PUTIN: Maybe he needs to change his shampoo.

PRESIDENT TRUMP: What was it we were supposed to discuss? Mugabe?

PRESIDENT PUTIN: Weinstein, I think. That man is a menace to women!

(cont'd)